

‘Culture, tourism and Fascism in Venice 1919-1945’

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## **Abstract**

The thesis engages with recent debates surrounding the relationship between culture, ideology and politics in Venice under Italian Fascism. It aims to establish if the Fascist project for the 'nationalization of the masses' through culture was successfully promoted in Venice, or whether local economic interests were afforded a higher priority by the town authorities. It argues that local elites were not primarily concerned with the endorsement of Fascist ideology through cultural politics but considered exhibitions, plays, concerts and festivals to be the route to boosting economic growth through the development of the tourist industry.

The thesis examines the ways in which the Venetian municipality was able to work with the Fascist regime, co-operating with national political directives provided these did not contradict the primary objective of restructuring and reviving the Venetian economy. Cultural policies in Venice were thus less a vehicle for Fascist ideology than a pragmatic means of injecting new life into the flagging post-war economy through the development of new forms of 'cultural tourism'. Festivals, exhibitions and traditional events were placed at the service not of the Fascist programme of mass cultural mobilisation, but of local business and political elites whose interests ultimately depended upon the revitalization of commercial tourism and the economic and social rejuvenation of the Veneto region. The familiar image of a 'totalitarian' state penetrating deep into all aspects of society is in need of serious qualification and a more realistic interpretation of Fascism in Venice must take account of the complex and sometimes ambiguous relationship between the national interest, as constructed by ideologically-driven Fascist organs and agencies, and the requirements of institutions and elites at the local level.

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## **Abbreviations**

ACS: Archivio Centrale di Stato  
AMV: Archivio Municipale di Venezia  
ASAC: Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee di Venezia  
ASV: Archivio di Stato di Venezia  
CIGA, Ciga: Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi  
LUCE: L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa  
Minculpop: Ministero della Cultura Popolare  
OND: Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro  
PNF: Partito Nazionale Fascista  
SADE: Società Adriatica di Elettricità  
ICE: Istituto Internazionale per la Cinematografia Educativa  
SIAE: Società Italiana Autori ed Editori  
UNAT: Unione Nazionale dell'Arte Teatrale  
SAVIAT: Società Anonima Veneziana Industrie Artistiche e Turistiche

## List of names

Alverà Mario: Podestà of Venice, 1930-38  
Barbantini Nino: art expert, member of the Biennale Administrative Committee at the end of the 1920s  
Bazzoni Romolo: Administrative Director at the Venice Biennale  
Beer Guido: Prefect of Venice, 1933-34  
Bettori Giovanni: Commissary of the National Fascist Association of the Industries of Spectacle  
Bianchetti Giovan Battista: Prefect of Venice, 1929-33  
Bolla Teodoro: President of the Provincial Federation of Commerce in 1932  
Busetto Giovanni: Venetian entrepreneur who fostered the birth of the tourist industry at the Lido  
Calzavara Pietro: President of the Lido Marine Hospital in the 1920s  
Campione Alfredo: Ciga manager in the 1930s  
Casattini Guido: President of the *Consorzio Alberghi e Pensioni Venezia e Lido* in 1932  
Casellati Vilfrido: President of the Province of Venice, 1939-43  
Catalano Carlo: Prefect of Venice, 1936-39  
Ciardi Ettore: Venetian painter included in the Biennale administrative committee in 1930  
Cini Vittorio: entrepreneur, part of the 'Venetian group' with Volpi and Gaggia  
De Feo Luciano: Founder of the Istituto Luce in 1924 and Director of the ICE in the 1930s  
De Pirro Nicola: Director of the *Ispettorato del Teatro* of the Minister of National Education  
De Stefani Alberto: member of the Venetian PNF and Minister of Finances  
Fornaciari Bruno: Extraordinary Commissary of Venice, 1924-1926  
Foscari Piero: town councillor, 1899-1919  
Freddi Luigi: Head of the Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia in the 1930s  
Gaggia Achille: entrepreneur, part of the 'Venetian group' with Volpi and Cini  
Gian Ferrari Ettore: Head of the Biennale Sales Office in 1941  
Giordano Davide: Mayor of Venice, 1920-24  
Giuriati Giovanni: Head of the Venetian PNF  
Grimani Filippo: Mayor of Venice, 1895-1919  
Maraini Antonio: Secretary General of the Venice Biennale of International Arts from 1928  
Marsich Piero: leader of the Venetian 'urban' Fascism in the early 1920s  
Molmenti Pompeo: Venetian deputy and senator, he was against the Porto Marghera project  
Nebbia Ugo: writer in the *Rivista di Venezia* in the 1930s  
Orsi Pietro: Podestà of Venice, 1926-29  
Petit Luciano: deviser of the Porto Marghera project  
Piacentini Marcello: architect included in the Biennale administrative committee in 1930  
Pica Vittorio: Secretary General of the Biennale until 1928

Reinhardt Max: director at the Biennale Theatre Festival in the 1930s  
Revedin Antonio: Ciga Manager  
Salvini Guido: director at the Biennale Theatre Festival in the 1930s  
Simoni Renato: director at the Biennale Theatre Festival in the 1930s  
Sorger Ettore: Venetian entrepreneur who fostered the birth of the tourist industry at the Lido  
Spada Nicolò: Venetian entrepreneur who fostered the birth of the tourist industry at the Lido  
Suppiej Carlo: Federal Secretary of the Venetian PNF  
Varagnolo Domenico: Head of the Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee  
Versino Silvio: Inspector of the provincial section of the OND in 1929  
Volpi Giuseppe: business magnate of the 'Venetian group', Fascist Minister from 1926 to 1928, President of the Venice Biennale from 1930  
Zajotti Alberto: President of the Opera Bevilacqua La Masa, 1935-38  
Zorzi Elio: responsible for the publications of the Ente Autonomo Biennale and Ateneo Veneto  
Zorzi Ettore: Podestà of Venice, 1929-30

## 1. Introduction

Nearly six decades after the end of the Second World War and the final collapse of the Fascist regime, the nature of Italian Fascism and its relationship with the cultural sphere still remains elusive. An enormous and seemingly ever-growing literature has focused on the Fascist political system, the necessary preconditions for the emergence of Fascist parties, the methods by which the Fascists succeeded in seizing power, the defining features of Fascist ideology, the nature of Fascist rule after the regime had been established, and the atrocities committed against internal dissidents and external opposition. It was long held that Italian Fascism had neither an original ideology nor a specific historical place and that it lacked a genuine culture of its own. This view was first expressed by the liberal thinker Benedetto Croce who saw Fascism as a 'parenthesis' in history, a period which did not properly reflect developments in Italian society and politics before 1919, and which left few traces on the subsequent phase of Italian democratic progress after 1943.<sup>1</sup>

Our image of Fascism has been heavily influenced not only by the repressive systems imposed upon several European countries but also by 'the inability of much of the earlier post-war Marxist historiography to recognize in [Fascism] anything but false consciousness, economic stagnation and social regression'.<sup>2</sup> This post-war Marxist interpretation, 'intricately bound up in the partisan experience, saw Fascism's relationship to culture as it did its relationship to society – namely, as the superstructure built upon the base of a reactionary capitalist dictatorship. Here Fascist cultural policy directly replicated larger processes of domination and control; its official culture obfuscated reality and confused audiences with distorted perceptions'.<sup>3</sup> Culture under Fascism was therefore considered merely as an arm of propaganda for the 'purpose of indoctrination and suppression'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Benedetto Croce, *Scritti e Discorsi Politici (1943-1947)*, vol. I, Bari, Laterza, 1969, pp. 7-16.

<sup>2</sup> David Forgacs (ed.), 'Introduction: why rethink Italian Fascism', in *Rethinking Italian Fascism: Capitalism, Populism and Culture*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1986, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Marla Stone, *The Patron State. Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Norberto Bobbio, taking the argument a step further, has dismissed the very idea of a genuine Fascist culture, and viewed the cultural products offered by the dictatorship as mere appendages to its instruments of control and oppression.<sup>5</sup> According to Bobbio, because Fascism did not produce any high culture, it did not have any cultural appeal at all, confining itself instead to the vulgar realms of rhetoric and propaganda.<sup>6</sup> In his work on the iconography of the Fascist press, Mario Isnenghi analysed the role of Fascist imagery in the construction of Fascist identity, yet, neglected the field of high culture entirely,<sup>7</sup> while Edward Tannenbaum also reduced regime-sponsored culture to an element of its propaganda campaign in his *The Fascist Experience* (1972).<sup>8</sup>

Historian Alberto Asor Rosa, however, in the 4th volume of *Storia d'Italia*, did engage systematically with the intellectual culture produced during the Fascist *Ventennio*. He located the origins of Fascism in the 'anti-Giolittian' mood prevalent amongst Italian intellectuals before Mussolini came to power and, more generally, in widespread feelings of disillusionment with capitalist society, liberalism, socialism and democracy.<sup>9</sup> Liberalism had failed to establish a liaison with intellectuals, while at the same time proving unable to compete with the ability of the emerging Fascist movement to appeal to the masses. Yet, when it comes to defining the relationship of Fascism with the intellectuals, and the question of forging consent through culture, Asor Rosa seems confined to a kind of Crocean idealism where Fascist ideology was a purely negative phenomenon, representing a

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<sup>5</sup> Norberto Bobbio, 'La cultura e il fascismo', in Guido Quazza (ed.), *Fascismo e Società Italiana*, Torino, Einaudi, 1973, pp. 224-26, 235, 243.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, 'Profilo ideologico del Novecento Italiano', in Cecchi E., Sapegno N., (eds.), *Storia della Letteratura Italiana. Il Novecento*, Milano, Garzanti, 1987, pp. 172-3. 'For the Croceans, 'true' culture created between 1922 and 1945 necessarily transcended political realities and responded to timeless aesthetic categories. Remaining 'uncontaminated', Italian culture waited in a holding pattern for the fall of the dictatorship in order to resume its authentic trajectory. This interpretation had the convenient corollary that 'true culture', by definition, was estranged from the rhetorical propaganda that made up official culture; therefore, the cultural forms produced in the service of the regime or under its umbrella a priori could not be considered 'art', nor could its practitioners be called 'artists' (Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 11).

<sup>7</sup> Mario Isnenghi, *Intellettuali Militanti e Intellettuali Funzionari. Appunti sulla Cultura Fascista*, Torino, Einaudi, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Tannenbaum, *The Fascist Experience. Italian Society and Culture 1922-1945*, New York, Basic Books, 1972.

<sup>9</sup> Alberto Asor Rosa, 'La Cultura', in Romano R., Vivanti C., (eds.), *Storia d'Italia. Dall'Unità ad oggi*, 4° vol., 2° tomo, Torino, Einaudi, 1975, pp. 1358-65.

powerful combination of anti-Marxist, anti-Enlightenment, and anti-Liberal tendencies. For Asor Rosa, since Fascism emerged as a negative intellectual force pitting itself against the very essence of modern thought, it was by its very nature, anti-culture.<sup>10</sup> Fascism, when it has been deemed worthy of being considered as a cultural movement at all, has tended to be dismissed as archaic and backward,<sup>11</sup> while the Fascist regime has been regarded as the more 'serious' side of the dictatorship as it became institutionalised, and deployed its ideological and technical resources to gain consent among the intellectuals.<sup>12</sup>

Logically, therefore, Fascist culture could not and did not equate to national culture since, as a flawed totalitarianism, Fascism could never hope to achieve 'total hegemony' over Italians.<sup>13</sup> For Asor Rosa, this failure was symbolised by Croce's intellectual refusal to accept Fascism. Indeed, Asor Rosa appeared to regard Croce as something of a ray of light in the dark ages of the *Ventennio* who was perhaps the only Italian philosopher who bore comparison with Antonio Gramsci.<sup>14</sup> Within this rather limited conceptual framework, it was natural for Asor Rosa to deny the existence of a genuine Fascist culture. Fascism, he observed, did not produce any literature of value, with any literary developments that did occur during the *Ventennio* doing so independently of the regime. In this way, the existence of 'autonomous literary societies' could become evidence for the case against the Fascist regime.<sup>15</sup> A similarly dismissive attitude is in evidence when Asor Rosa came to consider the avant-garde movements, or the literary school *Novecento letterario*.<sup>16</sup> Caught between apparently contradictory perceptions of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 1365.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 1376.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 1381. For Asor Rosa, 'Il Fascismo movimento non e' altro, a guardar bene, che la 'cultura' del Fascismo, cioe' il coacervo delle ambizioni insoddisfatte e delle illusioni sbagliate, questo impasto policesco di vocianesimo, prezzolinismo, papinismo, soffocismo, gentilanesimo, futurismo, sorelismo, dannunzianesimo, ruralismo reazionario, controriforma, -la fogna insomma in cui va a sboccare tutto l'aspetto arcaico, arretrato, provinciale e schizofrenico della cultura italiana postunitaria' (Ibid, p. 1386).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 1471.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 1537.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 1514. The original text read: 'Una società delle lettere è una smagliatura del sistema totalitario, una testimonianza della sua incompiutezza, o ne rappresenta la conseguenza logica, il prodotto ovvio e naturale sul piano dell'evasione? (...) In questo senso, appare abbastanza chiaro che un concetto di letteratura come valore non rientra negli schemi dell'ideologia del regime o è quanto meno, una posizione eretica' (Ibid).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pp. 1501, 1507.



Fascism as essentially non ideological and as a repressive and coercive regime, Asor Rosa failed to appreciate or escape the limitations of his own normative position.<sup>17</sup> When he engaged with the role of corporatism as an embodiment of the Fascist 'Third Way', he focused on the rigidity of corporations as mediators, the rhetoric of cultural production, and the ability of the dictatorship to deploy powerful means of coercion.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in his conclusions, Asor Rosa risked contradicting this general argument by claiming that the 'fascistization of culture' often did not entail ideological inculcation, 'just the institutional management of different sections of cultural producers'.<sup>19</sup>

In all these accounts, it seems that the historiographical debate has been limited to a bipolar system pitting 'Fascist' versus 'anti-Fascist'. According to Marla Stone, 'the post-World War II political and moral settlement stood on a set of dichotomies: fascist and antifascist; totalitarian and democratic, and, in the sphere of the arts, reactionary representational aesthetics and modernist democratic abstraction'.<sup>20</sup> In the field of culture, however, such rigid binary distinctions and discourses have proved of limited use. Lino Pertile, for instance, has argued that in the early years of the Fascist regime the government had no cultural policy, and that high culture was given a good deal of freedom to continue through the traditional channels of the pre-Fascist liberal elite,<sup>21</sup> while Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has made a convincing case that the Italian Fascist government, rather like the British government of the same period, behaved towards the cinema with a certain amount of indifference.<sup>22</sup>

In the case of Venice, even though the city had its Fascist administration, the local ruling class was clearly able, in the field of cultural tourism, to retain its traditional aims of using cultural showcase events to promote economic resurgence

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 1401.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 1489. 'Essa [corporazione] presupponeva un'articolazione estremamente rigida del lavoro intellettuale, una fissità di temi ideologici e culturali ruotanti in una gamma estremamente limitata. (...) Dietro il velo ideologico delle corporazioni, riemergono semplicemente le strutture dello stato totalitario, con le sue capacità di pressione e di persuasione articolate e potenti, ben intrecciate con quelle della repressione e della coercizione' (Ibid, pp. 1487-8).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 1483.

<sup>20</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Lino Pertile, 'Fascism and Literature', in Forgacs (ed.), *Rethinking Italian Fascism*, p. 162.

rather than the indoctrination of the masses. Here, the argument that local interests sought to exploit the central Fascist authorities through an appeal to their ideological sensibilities is not to be rapidly dismissed. While Venice accepted Fascism provided she could carry on with her own business, Fascism accepted that 'fascistisation' in Venice had to come to terms with the needs of international tourism and culture, imbued with commercial possibilities instead of Fascist ideology. The term 'accommodation' rather than 'coercion' or 'consent' can better define the complex webs that were established between the Fascist regime and the Venetian populace.

In the past, little attention was given to the attraction Fascism offered to millions of people, and to the subtle strategies of persuasion employed by the regime to win over the masses to their cause. Some scholars still seem reluctant to relate artistic manifestations such as painting, sculpture or architecture with the historical analysis of Fascism, confining them to the realm of history of art. Recently, however, cultural historians have become increasingly wary of interpretations which focus on elements of high culture presented as virtually untouched and untainted by Fascism.<sup>23</sup> Instead, in the last few years, serious research has centred on the importance of culture and aesthetics in the construction and consolidation of the twentieth century's political ideologies.<sup>24</sup> Scholarship of this kind has demonstrated the benefit of approaching Fascism from this new perspective.

For instance, the so-called 'culturalist school' pioneered by Roger Griffin, Alexander De Grand, James Gregor, George Mosse and Roger Eatwell, focuses on the primacy of culture and ideology as being at the very heart of Fascist thought.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to earlier interpretations in which Fascism was denied any viable cultural value of its own, Gregor considers the phenomenon to have viewed itself as

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<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'The Italian Cinema under Fascism', in Forgacs (ed.), *Rethinking Italian Fascism*, p. 143.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance, Bobbio, 'La cultura e il Fascismo', in Quazza, *Fascismo e Società Italiana*, p. 229.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance, Richard J. Golsan (ed.), *Fascism, Aesthetics and Culture*, Hanover/NH, University Press of New England, 1992.

<sup>25</sup> See for instance, Roger Griffin, 'The primacy of culture: the current growth (or manufacture) of consensus within Fascist studies', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 37, 1, January 2002, p. 36.

part of a general 'cultural rebirth'<sup>26</sup> committed to the regeneration of the nation involving an ideological preparation of the ground by elites keen to mobilise the power of language, culture and rhetoric in order to redefine the nation and reconstitute the people in keeping with the predominant myth of 'rebirth'.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it might be argued that any valuable reassessment of Fascism in acknowledging the recent historiographical developments must take into account the fact that the Fascist phenomenon did at least seek to forge a political culture of its own. Only in this way is it possible to produce a serious contribution to the existing scholarship.

Building on Antonio Gramsci's distinction between 'force' and 'consent', Axel Körner, in his work on Bologna after the Unification, points to the paramount importance of cultural activities in the process of formation of social realities. The symbolic language of visual arts, music, theatre, architecture and their social meaning can be used, he argues, to build up and consolidate political consensus. Social historians, Körner claims, should recognize the very real role of cultural production in the formation of groups and constituencies favourable to the ruling class.<sup>28</sup>

The usage of culture made by Fascism has been explored by Emilio Gentile, too, who has centred on the importance of 'theatricality' in Fascist politics, and the collective function assigned to symbols, myths, festivals, parades and ceremonies in winning mass popularity for the regime.<sup>29</sup> According to Gentile, this 'theatricalisation' of politics was fundamental in shaping the spirit of the masses and securing their consent.<sup>30</sup> He argues that

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<sup>26</sup> As cited in Griffin, 'The primacy of culture', p. 29; James Gregor, *Phoenix: Fascism in our Time*, New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Pub., 1999, p. 189.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Axel Körner, 'The construction of bourgeois identity in national and urban contexts: Bologna after the Unification', in Strath B., Witoszek N., (eds.), *The postmodern challenge: perspective East and West*, Postmodern Studies, 27, 1999, pp. 171-5.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance, Emilio Gentile, *Il Culto del Littorio: la Sacralizzazione della Politica nell'Italia Fascista*, Bari, Laterza, 1993; Ibidem, *Le Religioni della Politica. Fra Democrazie e Totalitarismi*, Bari, Laterza, 2001.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, 'Theatre of politics in Fascist Italy', in Günther Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre. Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925-1945*, Providence, RI, Berghahn Books, 1996, pp. 79-80.

'All 'sacred' and 'secular' Fascist mass spectacles were instruments to manipulate public opinion, to enforce obedience and to obtain consent by appealing to people's emotions, fantasies and desires. In the period of greatest economic crisis, the mass spectacles compensated for the privations suffered by the lower classes of society'.<sup>31</sup>

To a large degree, Fascism's 'educational' effort was dedicated to the propagation of a 'campaign of faith', drawing upon those symbols and rituals which could consolidate popular belief in Fascist myths, and strengthen the commitment of the masses to the regime.<sup>32</sup> 'Fascism never lost sight of this goal: the total politicisation of individuals and the masses',<sup>33</sup> and the regime, according to Gentile, made extensive use of this 'aesthetic dimension of politics to implant its ideology into the heart of the Italian populace and to transform it into a community of believers'.<sup>34</sup> He is adamant that 'Fascism was the first totalitarian, nationalist movement of this century which used the power of a modern state in an attempt to bring up millions of men and women in the cult of the nation and the state as being supreme and absolute values',<sup>35</sup> and has consistently argued that Fascism penetrated deeply into the moral and cultural fabric of Italian society.<sup>36</sup>

For Roger Griffin, the mobilisation of culture in the service of shaping a particular national consciousness, evident in the politicised employment of various myths, rituals and popular festivals, was by no means an exclusive feature of *Italian* Fascism, being a relatively consistent characteristic of fascism in general. He claims that

'One of the most important consequences of the fascist dream of creating a cohesive national State not only simultaneously democratic and aristocratic but *charismatic*, was the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pp. 90-1.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, 'Fascism as political religion', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25, 2-3, May-June 1990, p. 241.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, 'Fascism in Italian historiography: in search of an individual historical identity', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 21, 2, April 1986, p. 202.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, 'Theatre of politics in Fascist Italy', in Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre*, pp. 90-1.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, 'Fascism as political religion', p. 248.

<sup>36</sup> This view has been challenged by the work of Richard Bosworth, who has argued that 'the evidence of an actual Fascist construction of new men and women, of a successful Fascist nationalization of the masses, is at best partial' (Richard Bosworth, 'The Touring Club Italiano and the nationalization of the Italian bourgeoisie', *European History Quarterly*, vol. 27, n. 3, 1997, p. 373).

pervasive aestheticisation of politics. (...) This expresses itself in the continual creation of a cultic social environment, both in the forging of 'sacred' spaces through monumental public building schemes, and through the constant invention of public ceremonies and rituals imbued with symbolic significance for the regeneration of the national community, whether overtly political (party rallies, state funerals for national 'martyrs'), apparently apolitical (sporting events, arts exhibitions), or quasi-religious (harvest festivals, solstice festivals, national feast days).<sup>37</sup>

Although it is possible to address the question of Fascism and culture from a variety of perspectives, it seems increasingly difficult, cultural historians claim, to neglect the power of cultural activities in binding the Italian nation to the Fascist regime. Several scholars have pointed to the idea of a crisis of political legitimacy as a consequence of the Great War, with the result that in the aftermath of the conflict it had become extremely hard to convince the masses to support the national cause. 'The traditional forms of authoritarian rule were no longer appropriate': for the Fascist state it became necessary to mobilise the population without allowing it effective participation in the processes of national policy-making.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, cultural involvement in the affairs of the nation became all the more important in persuading the masses to give active and unconditional consent to the regime.

Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi ventures an explanation of what drew and bound Italians to Fascism through a deconstruction of Fascist rhetoric, ritual, myth and symbol. She confronts the contradictions of Fascist ideology and its flexibility in practice, and details the ideological, cultural and rhetorical innovations and appropriations which Fascism mobilized to reshape Italian political culture and national identity. Fascism depended above all upon an aestheticized politics, and public spectacle was the way in which the regime expressed its political culture.<sup>39</sup> Another scholar to posit the absolute centrality of public ritual to the forging of

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<sup>37</sup> Griffin, 'Staging the nation's rebirth', in Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre*, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Reinhard Kühnl, 'Cultural politics of fascist governments', in Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre*, p. 33.

<sup>39</sup> Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: the Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy (Studies on the History of Society and Culture)*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997.

consensus for Fascist rule is Reinhard Kühnl (even though his analysis is focused upon generic rather than Italian Fascism). Kühnl argues that:

‘Culture had a significant function in the process of creating a mentality that forced people to submit to the dictates of their fascist governments. (...) The ultimate task assigned to art and other cultural activities was to offer ideological support to the ruling class, but also to prepare and mobilise the people for the war of conquest. (...) Mass spectacles helped to forge a national community, whereas theatrical entertainment (farces, comedies, music-hall, operetta, etc.) kept the population and the troops in a good mood’.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, Jeffrey Schnapp ‘has alleged that the regime elaborated a total concept of spectacle, founded on a wholesale Fascist theatricalisation of Italian life’.<sup>41</sup> In his work upon cultural politics under Fascism, Schnapp held that the regime had never taken too seriously the texts and contents in play in Fascist theatre, since these texts were, he argued, riddled with contradictions. What mattered was ‘the aesthetic over-production through which the regime sought to compensate for, fill in, and cover up its unstable ideological core’.<sup>42</sup> The mythological reworking of Fascist ideals and ethics, acted out and given life through various rituals, provided a far more effective set of tools for the manufacture of consent towards the regime than the conduct of more conventional propaganda could ever hope to achieve:

‘(...) Il Duce called for a new kind of theatre altogether; a theatre for the masses if not of the masses. The ground for a mass theatre was prepared in Italy and elsewhere. Apart from open-air theatre, the thespian cars, a fleet of mobile modular theatres, were already in operation throughout the country. The primary purpose of these productions was hardly to advance the theatrical repertory. Rather, as Schnapp shows, it was to bind a disparate people into a linguistic group that was also a political mass, one national-ideological body.

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<sup>40</sup> Kühnl, ‘Cultural politics of fascist governments’, in Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre*, p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> As cited in Bosworth, ‘Tourist planning in Fascist Italy and the limits of a totalitarian culture’, *Journal of Contemporary European History*, Cambridge University Press, vol. 6, part I, March 1997, p. 2; Jeffrey T. Schnapp, ‘18 BL: Fascist mass spectacle’, *Representations*, vol. 43, n. 1, 1993, pp. 92-3.

<sup>42</sup> As cited in David Roberts, ‘How not to think about fascism and ideology, intellectual antecedents and historical meaning’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 35, no. 2, April 2000, p. 204; Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 18 BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 6.

And in this binding, the medium was the message: these productions presented the fascist regime as a ubiquitous agent committed to modernizing the nation, to turning Italy into a totality at once aesthetic, technological and political –in a word spectacular’.<sup>43</sup>

If this ‘new cultural history’ has a major flaw, it is its willingness to take at face value Fascist rhetoric about the construction of a ‘totalitarian society’ in which the regime had accessed every aspect of the Italian nation. An interesting set of questions arise when, having taken on board many of the arguments and methods of the new cultural historians, other scholars have tended to examine life under the regime in a systematic way.<sup>44</sup>

This study will utilise detailed archival research to look at one aspect of Fascist cultural politics. It will examine the cultural policies of Venice between the two world wars. Its focus will be upon Venice, a town caught between the Fascist regime and the demands of the local economy. Venice, under Fascism, represented an outstanding example of a cultural resort existing between local economic interests, national directives and the European tourist economy. The history of the relationship between the Fascist state and Venetian cultural politics tells us much about the ambiguous nature of the project to ‘nationalise the Italian masses’.<sup>45</sup>

Since the late nineteenth-century, the ‘nationalisation of the masses’ had, in various forms, been a consistent feature of the nation-building ambitions of Italy’s ruling elites.<sup>46</sup> Gentile has argued that Fascism ‘intended to integrate and ‘nationalise’ the masses within the structures of a new totalitarian state transforming them into an organised moral community under the command of a hierarchy, inspired by a limitless belief in Fascism’s myths, which were to be transmitted to them through organisations, symbols and rituals’.<sup>47</sup> Given the absence of any single Fascist style, however, it is difficult to evaluate the complex relationship between art and Fascist rhetoric, and it is not the point of this study to

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<sup>43</sup> Hal Foster, ‘Foreword’, in Schnapp, *Staging Fascism*, p. XIII.

<sup>44</sup> See for instance, Bosworth, ‘Venice between Fascism and international tourism 1911-45’, *Modern Italy*, 4, 1, 1999.

<sup>45</sup> The term ‘nationalisation’ indicates the process through which a population is integrated by the state into the nation also in order to achieve its consensus to rule.

<sup>46</sup> See for instance, George L. Mosse, *The Nationalisation of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*, New York, Howard Fertig, 1975.

establish the level of ideology incorporated by the cultural events staged in Venice. For the purposes of this work, the content of the cultural showcases is less important than how the Venetian municipality attempted to use them as a means of pursuing the locally determined interests of the town, in particular through their being placed at the service of the all-important local tourist economy.

It is the aim of this thesis to investigate the attitudes of the Venetian ruling class to the Fascist national project of the 'aesthetization of the masses'<sup>47</sup> through culture and the extent to which local elites regarded Fascist ideological objectives as compatible with their own regional interests. Analysing the Venetian case, the thesis will demonstrate that local elites were not primarily interested in the promotion of the Fascist ideology in the city through cultural politics, but rather that when staging exhibitions, plays, concerts and festivals, they were simply prioritising economic growth and the vitality of the tourist industry, closely inter-related objectives that clearly pre-dated Fascism's rise to power. The thesis will also explore the ways in which the Venetian municipality found a 'niche' within Fascism, taking advantage of national politics to satisfy its own dream of wealth and prosperity, regardless of ideological motivations.

These themes are developed through the process of addressing a number of fundamental questions. Were the cultural politics of Venice a straightforward vehicle for Fascist rhetoric and the creation of a national consciousness, or were such concerns combined with and balanced against pragmatic, non-ideological purposes? How did the Fascist regime's expressed desire for a 'mobilisation of mass culture' interact with the city authorities' own priority of revitalizing the economy through the benefits of traditional cultural events? How far, and with what degree of commitment, did Venice acknowledge Fascist rhetoric within her economic plans to rejuvenate the area? These questions raise numerous important issues, and the answers to them may produce an interpretation of Italian Fascism that sits uneasily with the image of a totalitarian state penetrating every level of Italian society, a view of the regime commonly associated with the new cultural

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<sup>47</sup> Gentile, 'Fascism as political religion', p. 241.

<sup>48</sup> The term indicates a process of nationalisation through messages conveyed by using aesthetic stances.



historians.<sup>49</sup> Instead, it can be demonstrated that life in Italy under Fascism could in several important respects remain relatively unaffected by state or party intrusion and were more usually characterised by a sense of continuity from the Liberal era through to the post-war Republican regime.

### **1.1 The importance of cultural tourism in Venice**

According to Richard Bosworth, for an entire century, between 1860 and 1960, Italy's most profitable industry (and certainly the one with the largest number of employees) was tourism. Tourism in Italy pre-dated the process of Italian unification. From the seventeenth century onwards, tourism played an increasingly significant role in the economic and social life of a range of Italian towns and states. It is against this historical background that the emergence of Venice as Italy's most popular twentieth century tourist destination must be understood, indeed, the first major bathing establishment opened as early as 1833.<sup>50</sup>

Almost a century later, in 1931, Mussolini publicly associated himself with this tradition and boldly pronounced tourism to be one of Italy's four major routes to prosperity.<sup>51</sup> For Bosworth, tourism was now considered as Italy's second most important industry (after agriculture) and, it was commonly believed, contained significant potential for further expansion. Developing the tourist industry was thus recognised as a matter of great importance at the highest levels of government (and the mounting economic crisis of the 1930s surely influenced Mussolini's consideration of the requirements of the industry at this particular point). In the years immediately after the Fascist seizure of power, Italy had enjoyed something of a tourist boom with the number of tourists in 1925 standing at 1,350,000, which represented an increase of more than 100 per cent on 1922 levels.<sup>52</sup> Bosworth claims that tourism was estimated to have injected some 3,600 million lire into the national economy, wiping out 61 per cent of Italy's budget deficit. Admittedly, the

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<sup>49</sup> See for instance, Gentile, 'Fascism as political religion', p. 241.

<sup>50</sup> Bosworth, *Italy and the Wider World 1860-1960*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993, pp. 174-5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

figures for 1925 may have been slightly exceptional as 1925 was *L'Anno Santo* (Holy Year), scheduled to occur only once every twenty-five years, and marked by a number of religious celebrations that brought many Catholic pilgrims to Rome in addition to the normal tourist visitors.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, for Bosworth, after 1925, the fortunes of the Italian tourist industry began to decline. An overvalued lira in 1927 acted as a strong disincentive to foreign travellers, and in 1929 there were only 900,000 tourist visitors, spending just 2,418 million lire (equivalent to just 35 per cent of the balance of payments deficit).<sup>54</sup> While such statistics were being digested by treasury officials and tourist industry bureaucrats, further economic and financial woes struck the United States and Germany, both major sources of visitors to Venice. The crisis reached its low point in 1932, when tourism's contribution to the national budget was estimated to be only 1,004 million lire. Industry spokesmen pointed out that this sum still amounted to 58 per cent of the budget deficit, but this can be easily explained if one considers the contracting size of the Italian economy and budget expenditure levels. Nevertheless, as Bosworth argues, tourism could still be said to be making an important contribution to the national economy, and industry insiders were proud to declare that Italy had confirmed its standing as the third most popular tourist venue in the world, behind France and Canada.<sup>55</sup>

In 1934, as part of the complex processes of bureaucratic enlargement and reorganisation of the Fascist state, responsibility for the national tourist industry had come under the control of Mussolini's son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano, and it was his drive towards administrative centralisation that led to the establishment of the *Direzione Generale del Turismo*.<sup>56</sup> In 1936, Mussolini reaffirmed his own commitment, delivering a forthright speech stressing the importance of tourism in Italy and declaring bluntly that 'Tourism [was] an ideology' and part of the path to an Italian modernity.<sup>57</sup> Tourism brought benefits for hotels, summer and winter resorts, sport facilities, railway and road services; all industries 'in need of

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, 'The Touring Club Italiano', p. 394.

<sup>57</sup> Raffaele Calzini, 'Invito a rivedere l'Italia', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 6 August 1936.

modernisation'. The industry could also boast of a role in recruiting thousands of Italians, promoting a series of prestigious cultural and leisure activities as well as providing the impetus for the construction of new theatres, concert halls, cinemas, beach and skiing establishments.<sup>58</sup> Essentially, however, tourism, for Mussolini, served two main functions. The first included both the import of foreign currency and the export of Italian currency abroad. The second entailed the fostering of Italian national prestige through promotion of greater awareness of the treasures of Italy. Tourist institutions, cultural associations, leisure companies and other powerful organisations such as the Touring Club<sup>59</sup> and the Istituto LUCE<sup>60</sup> were all vehicles for the dissemination of cultural and tourist propaganda: as an example, in 1936, the central events of such policy were considered to be the Milan Triennale and the Venice Biennale.<sup>61</sup>

In the case of Venice, we have the example of a city serving the economic purposes of tourism (sustaining the import of foreign currency and the export of Italian currency as demanded by the Duce), but it cannot be said that the municipality dedicated itself to any broader Fascist ideological functions such as the representation of the nation at home and abroad if this did not create any direct economic benefit. Cultural tourism in Venice had always represented the main source of profit for the city, and cultural events were primarily understood as a necessary incentive for the tourist movement rather than reinforcing the Fascist ideological project. Despite Mussolini's declarations, tourism in the lagoon had never operated as a predominantly ideological vehicle but was geared essentially towards practical concerns, and the tourist industry was more a centre of corporate opportunism than rigid Fascist fanaticism. In a city where the town council had

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> The Touring Club Italiano was an association founded in 1894 which aimed at the spread of 'cultural and qualitative promotion of tourism' amongst Italians (Giuseppe Bozzini, 'Turismo insieme: l'associazionismo è il Touring Club Italiano', in Touring Club Italiano (ed.), *90 Anni di Turismo in Italia 1894-1984*, Milano, TCI, 1984, p. 35).

<sup>60</sup> Born in 1924, the Istituto LUCE (L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa) was a body created by Fascism in order to ensure the presence of the state in the cinematographic industry which had, up to that point, been dominated by private hands. The Istituto LUCE aimed at promoting a type of educational and propagandistic production, isolated from commercial interests.

<sup>61</sup> Calzini, 'Invito a rivedere l'Italia'. However, in his work on the Touring Club Italiano, Bosworth insists that the Club was 'alien to any political commitment which [was] completely outside its own

considered making degree-level qualifications compulsory for those acting as tourist guides,<sup>62</sup> and where the town celebrations committee included as many as seventy members,<sup>63</sup> keeping tourism alive was vital, particularly in the years of the Great Depression.

Even dedicated and cultured Fascists such as Ugo Ojetti,<sup>64</sup> when looking at Venice, pointed to the practical economic benefits of cultural events, claiming that they should be arranged not only for the sake of education but also for their commercial potential. Noting the success of the *Settecento* Exhibition of traditional Venetian crafts<sup>65</sup> the previous year, Ojetti urged that similar events be set up in the future.<sup>66</sup> By the same token, according to Antonio Maraini, Secretary General of the Venice Biennale of International Arts from 1928, Venice should be keen to welcome to the Biennale<sup>67</sup> retrospective exhibitions which had been so appreciated in the past, while the cultural initiatives of the Venetian municipality should cater for a broad local public, so as to contribute to the overcoming of the town's economic difficulties. In addition, it was recognized that publicity and marketing for the programmes of cultural events in Venice were crucial if the Venetian tourist industry was to be modernised, enabling it to do well in a competitive international tourist market.<sup>68</sup> For Ojetti, therefore, the economic function of tourism was as important as the ideological function. As for the Biennale, as will be discussed in a later chapter, debates at meetings of the administrative committees often had more to do with the promotion of an entrepreneurial outlook and economic benefits than with artistic or propagandistic factors.<sup>69</sup>

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field of interest (...). The official stance thus was, and remained that the TCI had no politics' (Bosworth, 'The Touring Club Italiano', p. 382).

<sup>62</sup> Archivio Municipale di Venezia, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 8 October 1931.

<sup>63</sup> 'Feste Veneziane. Consensi e dissensi', *La Nuova Venezia*, 6 August 1924.

<sup>64</sup> Ojetti was a writer and journalist who founded and directed the cultural reviews *Dedalo*, *Pegaso* and *Pan*. He was a member of the directive board of the *Enciclopedia Italiana* and was appointed *Accademico d'Italia* in 1930.

<sup>65</sup> The exhibition will be extensively discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>66</sup> Ojetti, 'Lettera al Conte Volpi di Misurata sull'Arte a Venezia', *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 2 October 1930.

<sup>67</sup> The exhibition will be discussed extensively in chapter 4.

<sup>68</sup> Ojetti, 'Lettera al Conte Volpi'.

<sup>69</sup> Strikingly, for the Venetian notable Elio Zorzi, the success of a cultural enterprise could be quantitatively gauged by tourist numbers (Zorzi, 'Bilancio consuntivo della Terza Mostra d'Arte Cinematografica', *Rivista delle Tre Venezie*, September 1935).

The emphasis on the importance of supporting cultural tourism in Venice became more prominent within Biennale records<sup>70</sup> from mid-1935 onwards, when the economic function of tourism was threatened by international hostilities. Although fascist ethics easily accommodated war, conflict and political instability represented a major danger for the tourist industry and Venetian commercial activities. In this regard, Giuseppe Volpi (the local business magnate and Fascist Minister who had been appointed President of the Venice Biennale in 1930<sup>71</sup>) and his entourage worried mainly about the consequences any conflict might have in halting flows of holidaymakers towards Venice, especially given the town's experience during the First World War.

In 1935, Volpi, in his reports to the Biennale committee, claimed that due to the present political situation, it was not safe to rely 'on any long-term advantages bestowed by the tourist industry upon the Venetian economy'.<sup>72</sup> Again, in 1939, he warned that political circumstances were adversely affecting the tourist sector, making it hazardous to predict future incomes other than those included in the official contributions made to the institution.<sup>73</sup> In 1941, Romolo Bazzoni, Administrative Director at the Biennale, bemoaned the fact that the exhibition, despite a ceremonial inauguration in the presence of the king on 18 August 1940, had been doomed to failure because of the decline of tourism caused by international events and above all, Italy's entry into the war on 10 June.<sup>74</sup> Volpi, therefore, aimed at putting the emphasis on the strategic role of tourism in Venice in a difficult period: 'Venice needs a conspicuous tourist movement which is not easily created in times like this. However, we have accomplished the task well due to our commitment to the Biennale festivals. This noble form of artistic attraction, between summer and autumn 1941, has contributed to the arrival of numerous

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<sup>70</sup> The Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, headed by Domenico Varagnolo, was inaugurated in November 1928 with the aim of keeping track of the life of the Biennale.

<sup>71</sup> Regio Decreto Legge 13 January 1930, *La Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, n. 33, 12 February 1930 (La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *La Biennale di Venezia. Storia e Statistiche*, Venezia, Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1932, pp. X-XIV). Volpi will be discussed extensively in chapter 3.

<sup>72</sup> Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee di Venezia, Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 31 July 1935.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, session 15 November 1939.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, session 21 April 1941.

travellers in town: 400,000 more tourists have visited the lagoon this year, compared to 1940'.<sup>75</sup> Volpi then adopted a statistical approach, arguing: 'Since every individual has spent about 70 lire in town, we can assume that the tourist movement has benefited the city to the extent of an extra 35 million lire over the previous year. This figure is therefore particularly meaningful for us, and we wish to announce it to Minister ~~Luciano~~ <sup>Alessandro</sup> Pavolini, so that he may know that the sacrifice in financially supporting the festival undertaken by the Ministry of Popular Culture was worth it'.<sup>76</sup> Unsurprisingly, Volpi never spoke in favour of the war during those meetings as it was substantially 'against' Venice's interests, and tourism had to be protected by every possible means.<sup>77</sup>

This is another striking example indicating that local needs and hopes were quite different from what fascist ideology should, in theory, have dictated. De Felice has argued that Mussolini lost the consensus he had achieved amongst the Italian population in the 1930s over the war issue.<sup>78</sup> This was all the more evident in cultural resorts resting upon tourism, such as Venice, where war threatened to fundamentally destabilise the local economy.

In *The Culture of Consent*, Victoria De Grazia claimed that she 'gradually understood the real political power of the modes of persuasion by which Fascism had penetrated every domain of social life from industrial enterprise and city neighbourhood to rural village'.<sup>79</sup> The Venetian case suggests that this can at best be only partially true. Throughout this thesis, it will be argued that the municipal authorities were not heavily involved in soliciting popular consent to the regime through cultural activities, nor would they accept uncritically the claim that national politics and local interests would invariably overlap, leading to a marked reluctance to follow the former if it was believed that the latter might be adversely affected.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, session 17 December 1941.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini Il Duce. Gli Anni del Consenso*, Torino, Einaudi, 1965, p. 156.

<sup>79</sup> Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent. Mass Organisation of Leisure in Fascist Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. IX.

<sup>80</sup> De Felice has showed that 'the industrial bourgeoisie did not adhere totally to Fascism, from its very beginnings, was always mistrustful of its radicalism, and did not induce the March on Rome, but accepted it in the anticipation of a normalisation of politics along conservative and constitutional lines, and with no intention of establishing a totalitarian regime (...). The upper bourgeoisie never

Artistic events staged in Venice, such as concerts, exhibitions, plays and festivals were, first and foremost, initiatives promoted by political and economic elites who were interested in the internationalisation of the city in the service of commerce and business. Therefore, culture in Venice had to translate into a viable commercial product to be sold to a distinctive, modern, twentieth century public.

Chapter 2 analyses the role of local cultural events in creating wealth and prosperity for the entire Venice community. The municipal Tourist Office had the vital task of arranging a continuous string of celebrations in order to keep the municipality financially afloat. Chapter 3 considers the career of Giuseppe Volpi, Venetian businessman and Minister of Finances under Fascism. Volpi strenuously promoted the project of the *Greater Venice* for which the Venetian district came to be divided into two distinct areas of economic development: Porto Marghera, with its industrial plants, and historic Venice, now entirely destined to cultural tourism. Chapter 4 explores the role of the Venice Biennale of International Arts as a champion of aesthetic diversification essentially for commercial purposes. In the 1930s, the exhibition also established itself as a mediator between art production and art consumption, providing an important liaison between the world of the artists and that of their patrons. The chapter also considers the *Settecento* Exhibition of 1929, and the introduction of decorative arts at the Biennale. The two moments were coordinated with the explicit aim of revitalizing the declining Venetian traditional activities, and incorporated, therefore, an economic function rather than an ideological one. Chapter 5 focuses on the birth of the Cinema Festival and the *Casino Municipale* as ‘tourist facilitators’, following the urban regeneration of the Lido beach resort as a site of elite tourism in the 1930s. Ultimately, the thesis locates itself within a developing revisionist literature which both challenges traditional interpretations of the nature of Fascist ‘totalitarianism’ and emphasises the extent to which local elites retained the ability to act independently of central government in order to pursue the goals which were identified as best serving their own economic interests.

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accepted Fascism completely because of its fears about Fascism to extend its control over economic activities (As cited in Gentile, ‘Fascism in Italian historiography’, p. 189).

## **2. Culture in Venice: commercial business or vehicle for Fascist ideology?**

This chapter considers the celebrations and events held during the summer season in Venice, examining them both as tourist attractions and contributors to the local economy. It will show how the institution of the Venetian Tourist Office was central to the preparation of the cultural programme, thereby importing a strong element of commercial interest into what might otherwise have been a project dominated exclusively by artistic, aesthetic or Fascist ideological motivations. In turn, those cultural events were then taxed in order to provide revenue for institutions of tourism (including the Tourist Office), strongly suggesting that the relationship between culture and commerce was an important influence upon the shape and nature both of the Venice tourist industry and Venetian Fascism.

In the 1930s, the task of formulating a tourist programme of genuine popular appeal was vital, not only on a season-to-season basis, but also with the long term aim of reviving the tourist economy during a period of prolonged international recession. Fascist organs such as the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND) were, unsurprisingly, involved in this common effort, and cultural events staged by them also sought to relieve unemployment and boost tourism. Such objectives go some way to explaining the importance attributed to the implementation of new tourist techniques, and the massive publicity and marketing campaigns undertaken as inherent parts of the processes of commercialisation to which Venice's cultural heritage was subject.

Tourism lay at the heart of the Venetian economy. Yet, the question of what kind of tourism should be developed prompted much debate and disagreement. As will be shown, when local tourist industry interests were encouraged by the state to foster a new mass Italian tourism drawn from a wide range of social groups cutting across traditional class boundaries, not all Venetian businessmen agreed. Some, particularly within the hotel industry, even when confronted with the argument that the development of mass tourism might well be of greater benefit to the entire town community, expressed a preference for continuing to appeal to elite customers. This tells us much about the reception of Fascist policies within the hotel industry; leading entrepreneurs were willing to follow Fascist directives provided that these



did not interfere with their often narrowly defined commercial outlook. Economic well-being and self-interest ultimately mattered more than the conveyance of any ideologically driven Fascist message, and sometimes even more than the economic fortunes of the town itself.

## 2.1 Cultural events at the heart of the Venetian tourist calendar

Venice's summer season revolved around the prestigious Biennale of International Arts, the opening ceremony of which traditionally marked the inauguration of the summer entertainments.<sup>1</sup> According to historian Marco Fincardi, the city's population was mobilised in the 1920s in order to welcome travellers, and prepare a series of celebrations and attractions covering the entire tourist season. A project of such scope involved agencies as important as the Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi (the Ciga -one of the largest Italian hotel companies based in Venice), the Biennale's commercial apparatus, and the OND, which, Fincardi claims, helped to forge a series of links between locals and foreigners through its cultural activities.<sup>2</sup>

These practices continued well into the 1930s, when the calendar of local fairs, concerts, sport events and exhibitions was structured by the town council to provide a continuous string of attractions for a multi-faceted audience. It seems that in Venice, any festival, whether established by Fascism or inherited from the Liberal era, was cause for celebration. All were meant to complement and contextualize 'the exceptional events held by the Biennale organisation'.<sup>3</sup> The Music, Theatre and Cinema festivals, for instance, were established, first and foremost, with the aim of framing and enhancing the Biennale Exhibition of International Arts<sup>4</sup> and 'were quite deliberately staged 'at the time in which the art exhibit [was] being held at the *Giardini Pubblici*'.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the 1930s, the

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 28 January 1935.

<sup>2</sup> Marco Fincardi, 'Gli 'Anni Ruggenti' dell'antico leone. La moderna realtà del mito di Venezia', *Contemporanea*, IV, n. 3, July 2001, p. 451.

<sup>3</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Festeggiamenti 1936', trim. II, 1936, n. 1292.

<sup>4</sup> Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 15, busta 'Spettacoli, trattenimenti, pellicole cinematografiche'.

<sup>5</sup> Alberto Zajotti, 'Origini, scopi e mezzi del Festival Musicale di Venezia', *La Rivista di Venezia*, August 1930. The film festival, however, went on to achieve enough popularity to enable it to

Biennale maintained its status as the highest profile event upon the summer programme, encapsulating the essence of prestigious cultural tourism by which Venice sought to identify itself. If, for the Fascist regime, the Biennale had by 1930 come to embody the apex of a national network of art exhibitions established by the syndical system,<sup>6</sup> for the Venetian town council, it had always stood at the top of the tourist entertainment schedule arranged for the summer season.

Because any local celebration, fair or amusement, was planned to fit in with and complement the main Biennale attractions, not only was its administrative committee in charge of supervising the preparation of the relevant festivals – its usual task – it also sought to ensure that a significant number of additional events were staged in support of the Biennale during summer vacations. Once Volpi and his entourage dedicated themselves to ensuring the overall success of the tourist season, they became increasingly involved not just with the Biennale venture, but with the planning of the Venetian entertainment calendar as a whole, operating in close connection with the *Consulta Municipale*.<sup>7</sup>

As soon as Volpi was appointed President of the *Ente Autonomo Biennale* in 1930,<sup>8</sup> he started directing his energies towards the organisation of as many events as possible in order to attract the widest public. For example, during one of the various committee meetings, Volpi turned his attention to a forthcoming Japanese Exhibition prepared by Baron Aloisi and Baron Okura from Tokyo, in the hope of staging it in Venice, ‘so that the Biennale might be enhanced by an additional attraction which would bring a larger attendance’.<sup>9</sup> Another project backed by Volpi entailed the nocturnal illumination of the exhibition pavilions in order to open them to evening visitors.<sup>10</sup>

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acquire a distinctive cultural identity of its own.

<sup>6</sup> Regio Decreto Legge 13 January 1930, *La Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, n. 33, 12 February 1930 (La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *La Biennale di Venezia*, pp. X-IV), with which the Venice Biennale was officially recognised as a state body.

<sup>7</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbalì delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. I, 27/02/30-07/12/31, session 3 March 1930.

<sup>8</sup> Regio Decreto Legge 13 January 1930, *La Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, n. 33, 12 February 1930 (La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *La Biennale di Venezia*, pp. X-IV).

<sup>9</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbalì delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. I, 27/02/30-07/12/31, session 3 March 1930.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, vol. II, 01/01/32-06/07/34, session 15 November 1932.

Throughout the 1930s, the municipal authorities prioritized the task of increasing tourist numbers. Various decrees from the Podestà, the Fascist official representing the local authority in Venice, and the head of the *Consulta Municipale*,<sup>11</sup> were aimed at this target. In this light, in 1931, the Podestà allocated 50,000 lire as a contribution to the Easter symphonic concerts. Under the sub-heading 'The necessity of prolonging the tourist season', the decree observed that 'the previous symphonic season successfully boosted tourism with great benefit to the hotel industry and the citizens' interest in general'.<sup>12</sup> A year later, the official determined that the town council would 'support with conspicuous funds any responsible civic enterprise which aimed at the creation of a post-tourist season [*stagione anti-turistica*] allowing Italian and foreign travellers to extend their stay in Venice'.<sup>13</sup>

On 5 February 1936, Volpi made clear that it was essential to the very success of the Biennale to establish a number of 'cultural showcases of a spectacular character'.<sup>14</sup> While he argued that the Cinema section did not need any additional support to maintain its existing popularity, he did express some concern about the Music Festival which had in past years, he observed, 'proved extremely costly without meeting the expectations of the public'.<sup>15</sup> He went on to mention how Antonio Maraini (Secretary General at the Biennale), during a recent trip to Budapest, had been introduced to the Hungarian National Ballet, whose shows 'could easily represent an artistic attraction to fit the Venetian celebrations'.<sup>16</sup> As

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<sup>11</sup> The Consulta Municipale in 1924 replaced the town council as a liberal body of local administration directly elected by the citizens. The members of the Consulta were in fact nominated by the Prefect of Venice, the official representing the central government in the city.

<sup>12</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Contributo per concerti orchestrali sinfonici di Quaresima 1931', trim. I, 1931, n. 93.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 5 February 1936.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. As early as 23 July 1930, the Prefect of Venice wrote to Guido Beer, member of the Grand Council, about the first Music Festival: '(...) I am doubtful about the public consensus given to the festival, considered the economic crisis affecting this city, too. Moreover, during the autumn season, all the Venetian manorial families are reaching to the countryside, while it is difficult to make any accurate predictions about the more elite foreign visitors better able to understand and appreciate this kind of events' (As cited in Enzo Scotto Lavina, '1927, 1936. Frammenti di un decennio di politica culturale tra Roma e Venezia', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 32, 82*, Venezia, ERI-Edizioni Rai, 1982, p. 22). The Music Festival will be later taken away from the Biennale's domain for economic reasons (see chapter 3).

<sup>16</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol.

for the theatre productions, Volpi announced that a definite programme was not available at that moment, but his idea was to stage, with the aid of the *Ispettorato del Teatro*,<sup>17</sup> two plays by Carlo Goldoni. Additionally, he tackled a proposal for horse racing from the Olympic Committee, asserting that the final decision should rest with the *Consulta*.<sup>18</sup> Even in wartime, Sunday concerts within the Biennale gardens were organised ‘with the hope of increasing the number of visitors and sales’.<sup>19</sup>

Because of its strategic importance, the planning of the tourist calendar of events was a most delicate task. To a large extent, public success directly depended upon the right timing and blend of cultural showcases. To Volpi, creating an appealing tourist schedule entailed the use of his trademark business rationality in order to offer high-quality commodities to an identifiable market. A fundamental rule was the rationalisation of the programme, so as to differentiate and stagger cultural products throughout the summer season. A glance at the typical calendar of events gives some idea of how hectic the Venetian summer season had become in its efforts to provide for the tourists and stimulate economic activity in the lagoon. In 1931, the monthly review *La Rivista di Venezia* published the programme of forthcoming summer events announcing that the Tourist Office in Venice had compiled the schedule of entertainment taking place during the ‘tourist year’:<sup>20</sup>

1-31 May: International Exhibition of physical education and sports;

Ceremonial inauguration of the exhibition at the Palazzo dell’Esposizione

Biennale in the public *Giardini Castello*;

8-17 May: Male and female federal competitions of gymnastics. 10,000 lire of prizes awarded;

12-13 May: International convention of the ‘Amici dell’Educazione Fisica’ in the

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III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 5 February 1936.

<sup>17</sup> The *Ispettorato del Teatro*, directed by Nicola De Pirro, depended from the Minister of National Education and dealt with the national theatrical production.

<sup>18</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 5 February 1936.

<sup>19</sup> Giuliana Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra. Arte e Propaganda negli Anni del Conflitto (1939-1944)*, Padova, Il Poligrafo, 2001, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> ‘L’estate turistica 1931 a Venezia e Lido’, *La Rivista di Venezia*, August 1931.

Napoleon Hall in St. Mark's Square;

21 June: III Pavia-Venice Motorboat race. Lavish prizes and honour cups;

28 June: Grand Festival of the Sea. Glorification of the Italian sailor. Offering of flowers, with historic and modern parades;

First decade of July: Grand Night Festival of the 'Venetian Shawl' at the Lido.

Election of the Queen of Shawls. Gifts and prizes;

18 July: Traditional 'Redentore' Festival<sup>21</sup> on the Giudecca Canal;

First decade of August: Pro 'remi velisque'. Regattas. Honour prizes;

August at the Lido: Grand mid-August fair. Exhibition of agricultural produce. Special chorus and band performances. Traditional Night Festival on the Grand Canal;

First ten days of September: Inauguration of the XV International Maritime Convention under the patronage of president right honourable Giovanni Giuriati;

1-29 September: Culture courses for foreigners and Italians organised by the *Istituto Internazionale Italiano* at Ca' Foscari University;

1-6 September: III International Tennis tournament at the Lido;

6 September: Grand Historic Regatta of gondolas along the Grand Canal. Prizes;

7-12 September: International golf competitions at the Lido;

13-20 September: III International nautical competition. Lavish prizes;

August-September: Fashion events and beach festivals at the Hotel Excelsior.

Outdoor dancing. Exceptional music concerts of the town band. Airborne excursions. Evening concerts in St. Mark's Square. Dancing at the *Giardini Castello*. Night boat trips. Amusement Park at the Lido.

Although none of the Biennale festivals were programmed for 1931, the summer calendar clearly highlighted the desire to achieve a continuous 'mobilisation' of tourists, and to 'satisfy the tastes of both natives and foreigners'.<sup>22</sup> In 1932, when the Biennale art exhibit and the supplementary festivals were included in the summer programme, various celebrations and amusements for a

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<sup>21</sup> The Festa del Redentore is one of Venice's most ancient popular festival which takes place at the end of July every year with a regatta and fireworks. It marks the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century plague that hit the area with devastating effects.

popular audience were accompanied by a string of more elitist cultural attractions which the town council had labelled 'art festivals promoted by the Biennale', and placed 'under the high patronage of the right honourable Head of Government'.<sup>23</sup> The Committee of Honour formed for the art festivals included several Fascist *gerarchi* such as Giuseppe Bottai, Galeazzo Ciano, Achille Starace and Alfredo Rocco, but the 'executive committee' was made up of three familiar names: Volpi, Maraini and the Podestà, Mario Alverà.<sup>24</sup> The 1932 celebrations were scheduled as follows:

24-25 April or 4 May: Inauguration of the Biennale of International Arts;

27-28 April or 6-7 May: Convention on Contemporary Art;

1-15 June: Contemporary Art Courses;

15-20 July: Poetry Convention and Literary Prize;

1-15 August: Cinema Festival;

1-15 September: Music Festival;

1-28 October: Competitions for the celebration of the March on Rome.<sup>25</sup>

It was important that these events celebrated grand local traditions, and the Podestà had made sure that programmes of amusements included 'various *feste* of purely Venetian character'.<sup>26</sup> However, the final tourist programme combined established local fairs with internationally acclaimed festivals; in formulating a viable commercial plan, it was vital to combine the charm of Venetian traditions with events of undoubted cosmopolitan appeal in order to meet the expectations of foreign visitors.<sup>27</sup> Celebrations of Venice, far more than being for the exclusive benefit of the local population, were in fact the product of a sophisticated tourist

<sup>22</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestàrili, 'Turismo. Spesa per le feste tradizionali', trim II, 1932, n. 907.

<sup>23</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, 'Feste d'arte promosse dalla Biennale di Venezia 1932'.

<sup>24</sup> The executive committee retained the right to determine the life of the Biennale whereas the Committee of Honour provided the symbolic support to the event.

<sup>25</sup> The document was actually a draft of the schedule, therefore dates were not definite yet.

<sup>26</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestàrili, 'Feste tradizionali veneziane', trim. II, 1931, n. 1259.

<sup>27</sup> 'The more exotic events would constitute an attraction for foreigners coming from distant nations and an enormous advantage to the city of Venice' (As cited in Fincardi, 'I fasti della 'tradizione'. Le cerimonie della nuova venezianità', in Mario Isnenghi, Stuart Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia. Il Novecento*, vol. III, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma, 2002, p. 1497: Antonio Pellegrini, *Il*

machine designed to attract the international *bel mondo*, whilst, at the same, time, also satisfying the local elites who cherished their 'time-honoured rituals of social distinction'.<sup>28</sup>

Fincardi has argued that the 'Venetian traditional costume fashion shows of 1928 [were] definitely inspired by a nationalist ideology'.<sup>29</sup> However, cultural autarchy and nationalism could not always sit easily with Venetian cosmopolitanism and the requirements of a multinational audience. In 1935, for example, and in spite of mounting anti-English feelings, Maraini praised the *Ente Biennale* for having included Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice' in the Theatre Festival programme, its production within natural Venetian settings enhancing the beauty of the performance.<sup>30</sup>

According to Emilio Gentile, in order to reinforce its own ideological positions and national mythologies in the public mind, the regime had tabled an entire calendar of celebrations, in which the key events of a mythological Fascist history (such as the birth of Rome and the stages of the Fascist Revolution) were commemorated in a series of ritual events. 'From the very start of the movement', Gentile argued, 'Fascism's main public ceremonies were organized not only to create evocative images of its power, but also to present symbolically the myth of the new Fascist state, in terms of its being a 'moral community' founded on a common faith, which united both classes and generations in the cult of the nation'.<sup>31</sup>

In Venice, however, public ceremonies were predominantly designed to contribute to an extended calendar of events intended for tourist consumption over and above ideological inculcation. Fincardi's argument, placing the emphasis on the pragmatic side of these representations rather than the spiritual is therefore more convincing than Gentile's.<sup>32</sup> In 1935, the Grand Festival of the Sea might have been

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*Dopolavoro a Venezia ed i Raduni dei Costum Italiani*, Scarabellini, Venezia, 1929, pp. 256-7).

<sup>28</sup> Fincardi, 'I fasti della 'tradizione'', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia. Il Novecento*, p. 1485.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 1486.

<sup>30</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 15 February 1935.

<sup>31</sup> Gentile, 'Fascism as political religion', pp. 244-5.

<sup>32</sup> Fincardi, 'I fasti della 'tradizione'', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1501.

replaced by the Festival of the Light, and the boat racing by a 'best of breed' dog show,<sup>33</sup> but the guiding spirit remained unchanged.<sup>34</sup> For Venice, the primary role of cultural attractions was their position at the centre of an extraordinarily busy summer schedule, while their function as agencies for the creation of consent to Fascism was clearly of secondary significance.

## **2.2 A vital activity: long-term planning and the tourist season**

The town council in Venice was responsible for formulating a summer list of events which was then implemented by the Tourist Office as part of its own agenda of expanding levels of tourism in the lagoon. However, planning a viable programme of leisure activities went beyond the single summer season, as the town council was well aware of the need to think in the long term. Since the various Biennale festivals only took place in even years,<sup>35</sup> during the 1930s, it became essential to discover alternative attractions to be established in the odd years, when the festivals were not held.

Ideally, these events would be as prestigious as those of the Biennale and equally successful in drawing visitors to Venice. In this way, the entire decade might resemble an extended, continuous festival of culture where each year would be remembered for one particularly outstanding cultural event. To this end, it was decided that major exhibitions of well-known Venetian painters would be staged to create attractions of unquestionable popularity that could stand at the pinnacle of the summer agenda. It was in line with this approach that the exhibition of Titian in 1935, the exhibition of Tintoretto in 1937, and the exhibition of Paolo Veronese in 1939 were hosted. Significantly, the Biennale executive committee took charge of their organisation, so in many ways they can be regarded as a 'continuation' of the

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<sup>33</sup> 'Water Festivals, art and sports events fill brilliant Venetian summer calendar', *New York Herald*, 26 May 1940.

<sup>34</sup> Moreover, in 1935, the Minister for the Press and Propaganda had made clear to the Prefect of Venice that the local travel agencies could charge an additional 2, 3 or 5 lire to those tourists benefiting from travel discounts to Venice during the summer-autumn season only if they provided their customers 'with a programme of events of paramount importance' (AMV, Affari Generali del Comune di Venezia, quinquennio 1931-34, fascicolo 34/X/3, 'Facilitazioni ferroviarie per la stagione estivo-autunnale').

<sup>35</sup> This did not include the Biennale Film Festival which, from its start in 1932, took place every year.



Exhibition of International Arts.<sup>36</sup> According to Margaret Plant, these retrospectives retained ‘considerable prestige at a time when cultivation of the past determined many cultural initiatives’.<sup>37</sup> For the municipal authorities, exhibitions commemorating classic Venetian artists signified both a celebration of the ‘Venetianness’<sup>38</sup> of the enterprise and a confidence in their national and international profile and status.

The minutes of the meetings of the *Consulta Municipale* reveal that, at the beginning of the 1930s, members were seriously concerned about the financial position and the total expenditures of the *comune*. The discussions suggest that these events were regarded as a practical contribution to tourism and its related commercial activities as part of the town’s response to the onset of the Great Depression. Breathing new life into the tourist industry was arguably the primary strategy for dealing with the economic crisis.<sup>39</sup> During the meeting of 12 February 1935, the Podestà announced that the financial health of the municipality had dramatically improved since the end of the First World War, with the deficit having been reduced from 22 million lire to 3 million lire. According to the Podestà, the intense activity of the local Tourist Agency was responsible for this radical financial improvement. He made clear that the Office, acting under his ‘strict supervision’<sup>40</sup> had introduced, for the upcoming season, ‘an art event of world magnitude, the exhibition of masterpieces by Titian which would be the focus for a major influx of Italian and foreign visitors’. ‘Tourism’, he argued, would ‘benefit greatly, and those who fear a decline of the tourist industry should only have to look at the positive returns’.<sup>41</sup> With this in mind, the Podestà declared that the municipality had regularly produced a programme of celebrations ‘which in combination with the natural and artistic beauty of Venice contribute[d] to the expansion of the tourist movement in the city’.<sup>42</sup> Alongside the standard sequence

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<sup>36</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 12 February 1935.

<sup>37</sup> Margaret Plant, *Venice, Fragile City 1797-1997*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 305.

<sup>38</sup> The term indicates a blend of Venetian history and local traditions.

<sup>39</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 12 February 1935.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Turismo. Rappresentazione de ‘Il Mercante di Venezia’ in campo S. Trovaso e Festa del Plenilunio in Piazza San Marco’, trim. III, 1935, n. 1140.

of entertainments, some 'extraordinary attractions',<sup>43</sup> such as the Titian exhibition,<sup>44</sup> Shakespeare's classic play 'The Merchant of Venice', and the Festival of the Full Moon were scheduled, for which the Podestà had allocated a grant of some 200,000 lire.<sup>45</sup>

In the event, the profits of the Titian Exhibition went beyond all expectations,<sup>46</sup> and the success led to a repetition of the experiment in 1937, with the exhibition of another Italian master, Tintoretto. In 1936, the Podestà had contacted the President of the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Communications via the Prefect, demanding authorisation for the Tintoretto exhibition for the upcoming 'tourist season'.<sup>47</sup> According to the Prefect of Venice, the event would be entirely compatible with the cultural policies of the regime in that it would 'both glorify Italian art and educate the nation'.<sup>48</sup> However, the detailed report that the Podestà included with his request placed the emphasis on the commercial appeal of the commemoration rather than any spiritual or moral improvement of the population. The report stated:

'An event such as the Tintoretto Exhibition which attracts so many tourists every year, more than any other enterprise embodies an initiative that may secure remarkable profits to the city. The immense popularity obtained by the Titian exhibition demonstrates that the Italian and international public of scholars and the general audience pay the greatest attention to retrospective exhibitions'.<sup>49</sup>

The Tintoretto exhibition was subsequently approved by the *Direzione Generale per il Turismo* (Undersecretary for Tourism, a body directly accountable

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Festeggiamenti estate 1935', trim. III, 1935, n. 1358.

<sup>44</sup> 'The Titian Exhibition brought together works from Venetian churches and galleries, the Louvre, and collections in Great Britain' (Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 305).

<sup>45</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Rappresentazione de 'Il Mercante di Venezia' in campo S. Trovaso e Festa del Plenilunio in Piazza San Marco', trim. III, 1935, n.1140.

<sup>46</sup> ASAC, Serie Segreteria/Arti Visive, 'Corrispondenza 1935'.

<sup>47</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Esposizione del Tintoretto 25 April-4 November 1937', trim. II, 1937, n. 834.

<sup>48</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 4, busta 'Esposizioni, mostre, congressi, fiere 1937'.

<sup>49</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Esposizione del Tintoretto 25 April-4 November 1937', trim. II, 1937, n. 834.

to the Minister for the Press and Propaganda).<sup>50</sup> The official catalogue bore a list of dignitaries, aristocrats or Biennale representatives included in the committee of honour or in the executive committee. This was followed by an abstract of an article by Alberto Zajotti<sup>51</sup> appearing in the *Rivista di Venezia*:

‘Whether upon aesthetics or administrative issues concerning the exhibition, the Duce always spoke clearly upon the matter. So he did, as soon as we started preparing the Tintoretto Exhibition, of which the Duce had been previously informed (...). This is an event which aims at celebrating not only the *Maestro* and the Venetian pictorial culture, but also the city of Venice itself. Tintoretto was indeed an artist who, more than anyone else, tied his image and his destiny to the city which jealously holds his masterpieces. Tintoretto has decorated every Venetian church, and the biblical composition of San Rocco can still be seen in the Palazzo Ducale. This is an event well qualified to follow in the artistic footsteps of the Titian Exhibition of 1935 which is a worthy celebration of Venice.’<sup>52</sup>

Here, in its trademark fashion, the Venetian ruling class was paying formal tribute to Fascism and to the Duce, while admitting that the event was arranged with the main aim of celebrating Venice. The search for approval from Fascism signified that the Tintoretto Exhibition was a Fascist event, in the sense that it had sought and acknowledged formal sanction from the regime, regardless of its content. Yet, its ultimate purpose was not the spread of the Fascist credo amongst its visitors as much as the benefit of the local community.

In 1939, after Tintoretto had enjoyed ‘a triumphant success’,<sup>53</sup> it was the turn of another celebrated Italian artist, Paolo Veronese. Significantly, alongside Volpi, Maraini and Fascist notables such as Giuseppe Bottai and Ugo Ojetto, the membership of the committee responsible for the exhibition included Leone Rocca, the President of the *Ente Provinciale per il Turismo* in Venice.<sup>54</sup> In 1941, the town

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<sup>50</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 4, busta ‘Esposizioni, congressi, fiere, 1937’.

<sup>51</sup> Zajotti was a writer in the *Rivista di Venezia* and President of the cultural institution *Opera Bevilacqua La Masa* from 1935 to 1938.

<sup>52</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 58, ‘Official catalogue of the Tintoretto Exhibition 1937’.

<sup>53</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 4, busta ‘Mostra della lacca veneziana del ‘700 a Ca’ Rezzonico’.

<sup>54</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Nomina del Comitato Generale per la Mostra di Paolo Veronese’, trim. III, 1938, n. 2660.

council had planned other classic art exhibitions featuring ‘names equally prestigious as those of Tintoretto, Titian and Veronese’.<sup>55</sup> These were supposed to be staged between 1<sup>st</sup> June and 30<sup>th</sup> September ‘when the number of visitors in the city reach[ed] its peak’, but in the event the turbulent political situation did not allow it.<sup>56</sup>

What is noticeable is that the Venice *comune*, when staging cultural events of such magnitude, was able to link commercial potential (the popular appeal of a Titian Exhibition) with indisputable cultural value (Titian’s works being undeniable masterpieces). Clearly, the town council had understood the importance of celebrating painters whose artistic reputation was strictly tied to their ‘Venetianness’, thereby transcending any undiluted reference to Fascism. Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese were names of unquestionable ‘Italianness’,<sup>57</sup> but at the same time, it was difficult for these names to be expropriated by the Fascist regime, since their fame and recognition long pre-dated the emergence of Fascism. Cultural showcases staged in Venice needed to satisfy the commercial tourist criteria as a matter of the first urgency, whilst representing Fascism remained something of an option. This strategy allowed the municipality to appeal to a wider public and to encourage national and international tourism. In such ways, Venice could preserve her much valued cosmopolitanism and attract the business of foreign tourists, while paying tribute to the cult of the nation at the same time.

### 2.3 The Venetian Tourist Office under Fascism

In Venice, much of the responsibility for the success of the tourist season rested upon the municipal Tourist Office (also known as the *Azienda Autonoma di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo*), which was in charge of arranging, supervising and financing several cultural events.<sup>58</sup> The Tourist Office was a local body working to

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, ‘Turismo. Mostra degli incisori veneti del ‘700’, trim. I, 1941, n. 993.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Significantly, opening and closing dates for the Titian Exhibition, as for several others cultural events, were 25 April (St. Mark’s day, patron of Venice) and 4 November (Vittorio Veneto day).

<sup>58</sup> See for instance, AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Turismo. Festeggiamenti 1938’, trim. IV, 1937, n. 976. When the Podestà provided grants for various festivals and exhibitions he drew upon the Tourist Office’s budget. However, major events such as the Biennale festivals or the Tintoretto Exhibition were subsidized not just by the Tourist Agency but also received state contributions. Moreover, they usually named their own executive committees (See for instance, ASAC, Serie

promote local tourism, and was considered to be an institution of such importance that it was directly managed by the Vice-Podestà.<sup>59</sup> It was in fact Vice-Podestà Leonida Macciotta who, during one of the meetings of the *Consulta*, expressed his concern about the excessive workload assigned to the Tourist Office. He complained that the bureau was over-burdened, and that at times the municipal authorities appeared to think it capable of ‘performing miracles’.<sup>60</sup> Macciotta warned that state law had actually devolved limited responsibilities to the Tourist Office in Venice, and that these related above all to publicity for tourism and the preservation of the public gardens. ‘They do not concern the arrangement of large scale entertainment, in any case’,<sup>61</sup> he asserted.

Apparently then, the Venetian Tourist Office had been ‘arbitrarily’ charged with the task of organising and funding the majority of the cultural entertainments performed in the city.<sup>62</sup> Because of its broad field of activity, the Tourist Office eventually came to replace other cultural bodies which had traditionally been responsible for managing cultural events. In this regard, it is unsurprising to note that it was not the Tourist Office that assisted the Municipal Direction for Fine Arts in the artistic domain, but rather the other way round: the latter institution was the junior partner, instructed to co-operate with the *Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo* in the ‘production of events and publications of an artistic nature’.<sup>63</sup> The fact that administrators from the tourist industry were chosen to plan these events, rather than experts drawn from cultural elites, tells us much about commercial priorities in Venice. Exhibitions, concerts, theatrical productions and festivals were treated, first and foremost, as commodities to be bought and sold, their merits considered and assessed according to strict economic criteria. In order to appeal to the widest possible tourist market, both in Italy and overseas, a practical commercial mentality was predominant.

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Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, ‘Feste d’Arte promosse dalla Biennale di Venezia 1932’).

<sup>59</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Delega di attribuzioni ai vice-Podestà’, trim. IV, 1934, n. 2038.

<sup>60</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 10 October 1935.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Istituzione della Direzione Municipale di Belle Arti’, trim. I, 1934, n. 1174.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Thus, considerable responsibility for the cultural events upon which the success of the vital tourist summer season rested, was placed in the hands of the Tourist Agency. The importance of putting together a busy and attractive summer agenda, providing a continuous sequence of celebrations for the tourist has already been emphasized.<sup>64</sup> Yet, this was perhaps more striking in the case of Venice than other cities that were economically dependent upon the revenues of the tourist industry. That an institution such as the municipal band, 'Claudio Monteverdi', which, from the Fascist perspective had a strategic function of 'education of the masses'<sup>65</sup> was administered by the commercially-oriented Venetian Tourist Office is symptomatic of the priorities of the local authorities. The municipal band performed around one hundred concerts every season, both in St. Mark's Square and at the Lido, providing a vital contribution to the creation of the classic perception of the city and its atmosphere held by tourist visitors.<sup>66</sup> Like other cultural institutions, the town band was, first and foremost an institution of the tourist trade, and the responsibility for it was thus assigned to the *Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo*.<sup>67</sup> Yet, as the Vice-Podestà Macciotta had done hitherto, two members of the town council, an accountant, Enrico Bassani, and Gino Damerini, an amateur art collector and the director of *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, expressed doubts as to whether such an arrangement was entirely appropriate.<sup>68</sup> Bassani claimed that there were so many responsibilities arbitrarily assigned to the Tourist Office, that it suffered from the extent of the burden placed upon it, and he saw the municipal band as a classic example. He expressed the hope that, at the very least, if the Tourist Office was to be expected to continue to shoulder such a burden, it should be endowed with considerably greater funds in order to meet its range of obligations.<sup>69</sup> The Podestà simply confirmed that it was the desire of the central government that the band should be directly controlled by the Tourist Office. 'After

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<sup>64</sup> See for instance, AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Festeggiamenti 1938', trim. IV, 1937, n. 976.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Rinnovo repertorio Banda Musicale', trim. III, 1938, n. 702.

<sup>66</sup> AMV, Mario Alverà, *L'Amministrazione del Comune di Venezia dal 15 luglio 1930 al 15 luglio 1934*, Venezia, 1934.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 7 November 1930.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, session 10 October 1935.

all,' he claimed, 'the band constitutes a paramount element of tourist attraction'.<sup>70</sup>

There was still the question of the nature of the band's musical repertoire to be decided, however. Would the band adopt a recognizably Italian set, more strictly in keeping with the Fascist cultural agenda, or would it endorse an international repertoire in order to complement Venice's traditionally cosmopolitan atmosphere? In fact, the annual planning of the band's repertoire was consistently done in such ways as to offer diverse musical programmes and high quality artistic entertainment to the cosmopolitan public which crowded St. Mark's square.<sup>71</sup> According to the Podestà, 'the city band's concerts had the function of making the foreign tourist's stay in Venice more agreeable. Moreover, they [had] the duty of educating the population through the performance of pieces that ought to meet the favour of the Venetian and foreign public'.<sup>72</sup> In the Podestà's mind, concerts in Venice could serve as a means for the manufacturing of consent as long as this still left room for cultural pluralism, cosmopolitanism and a distinctly international flavour.

The Biennale administration, too, benefited periodically from the intervention of the Tourist Office which acted to alleviate its financial difficulties. Payments to the *Ente Biennale* were recorded under the heading 'Extraordinary contribution to the Biennale of International Arts'.<sup>73</sup> Equally striking, on 18 July 1930, *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, observed that 'all the administrative functions of the First Music Festival were assumed by the Venetian Tourist Office'.<sup>74</sup> Thereafter, on 30 July, Adriano Lualdi, acclaimed composer under Fascism and head of the executive committee of the Music Festival, urged the central government (in the person of Balbino Giuliano, Minister of National Education) to contribute to the event to the tune of 60,000 lire. The sum was payable to the following: '*Al Comune di Venezia, Ufficio Turismo, per il Festival Musicale*'.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, additional

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Rinnovo repertorio musica Banda Municipale anno 1940', trim. I, 1940, n. 3435.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Rinnovo repertorio musica Banda Municipale', trim. III, 1938, n. 702.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 'Contributo Straordinario all'Ente Autonomo Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte', trim. IV, 1933, n. 439.

<sup>74</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 16, busta 'Spettacoli, trattenimenti, pellicole cinematografiche'. The artistic functions were assumed by an executive committee (Ibid).

<sup>75</sup> La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia* 32, 82, p. 26.

contributions of 35,000 lire, payable to the Venice *Comune*, were taken from the budget of the Tourist Office.<sup>76</sup>

In a similar fashion, one of the most outstanding cultural institutions in Venice, the Theatre *La Fenice*, enjoyed a highly privileged relationship with the Tourist Office. As an example, in order to defy the financial crisis affecting *La Fenice* in the 1930s, the Tourist Agency, seemingly quite prepared to renounce the theatre's glorious dramatic tradition, made an offer in 1932 to transform it into a modern cinema, justifying this as a reform in keeping with the changing times and the only way to turn the theatre into a profit-making enterprise. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, the proposal met with a marked lack of enthusiasm from the theatre's executive board.<sup>77</sup>

Economic pragmatism and tourism remained central concerns in the process of arranging cultural events at the theatre. In 1934, the Fascist Syndicate of Musicians expressed a desire to stage concerts at *La Fenice* in order 'to alleviate unemployment amongst theatre personnel in general'.<sup>78</sup> The Podestà, favourable to the initiative, instructed the Tourist Office in Venice to contribute to it financially, whilst making municipal support for the project conditional upon the principle that 'every single performance employ[ed] a set number of Venetian musicians within the orchestras'.<sup>79</sup> Composers chosen for the various concerts included Wagner, Verdi, Bizet, Puccini and other internationally renowned names of opera. This cosmopolitan approach was justified, according to the Podestà, by the fact that Venice was the site of the *Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo*, and that it was therefore 'vital to support any initiative that served to attract tourists and liven up their stay'.<sup>80</sup> Why would the Tourist Office be interested in organising various concerts at the Theatre *La Fenice* if these made no economic contribution to the advantage of Venetian tourism?<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> 'La Fenice e la sua crisi', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 8 June 1932.

<sup>78</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Stagione lirica di Carnevale al Teatro *La Fenice*-Sovvenzione', trim. IV, 1934, n. 2554.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 'Contributo per l'impresa organizzatrice della stagione d'opera alla Fenice', trim. I, 1931, n. 1314.



Contributions from the *Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo* in favour of *La Fenice* became more frequent when, in 1938, the responsibility for the administration of the theatre was taken out of private hands and placed under the auspices of the municipality, in accordance with the wishes of the Ministry for the Press and Propaganda.<sup>82</sup> In fact, as early as 1935, the *Consulta Municipale* had expressed its willingness to consider assigning responsibility for the theatre to the *Comune*, it being no longer prepared to tolerate ‘the serious imbalance existing between summer and winter tourist seasons for the sake of those citizens employed in commercial activities (...). Once the agreement [was] to be signed, the municipality will [have] revive[d] the glorious theatre, benefiting all those people who earn[ed] a living from the theatre industry’.<sup>83</sup> Despite the fact that Article One of the new charter made clear that ‘any musical events performed at the *La Fenice* Theatre must have solely artistic and no commercial goals’,<sup>84</sup> Article Two established that the *Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo* was to become a major financial backer of the theatre, ‘so that it might live up to the expectations of being a paramount institution in Venice’.<sup>85</sup> The only economic force capable of reviving the town’s major theatre was tourism, and it was therefore concluded that *La Fenice* could only be transformed into a profitable business if it were placed under the authority of the Tourist Office. It was thus no coincidence that some of the most prestigious cultural sites and institutions in Venice were managed by local tourist agencies with remarkably little input from cultural élites. Clearly, it had been decided that the contributions such institutions could make to the economic well being of the town were simply too important to be left in the hands of those lacking the requisite business experience and commercial savoir-faire.

## 2.4 Culture taxed in favour of tourism

The thesis that culture in Venice was placed at the service of the commercial tourist agenda is further strengthened by the fact that profits generated by the numerous cultural events of the tourist seasons were actually taxed (either by

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<sup>82</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 5 May 1936.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, session 12 February 1935.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, session 17 April 1935.

the Venetian municipality or the central government), and the revenue generated subsequently invested in the local tourist industry and its affiliated institutions. In a city that made a living from any form of leisure activities, cultural practices had to pay their way and contribute to the economic well-being of the Venetian *milieu*.

As an example, major Venetian cultural events such as the Biennale of International Arts or the 1937 Tintoretto Exhibition were required to pay contributions to the *Ente Provinciale per il Turismo*.<sup>86</sup> The *Imposta di cura, soggiorno e turismo* (a local tax) was levied upon cultural events set up within the domain of the Venetian *Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo* and entailed a fee of 3% upon entrance tickets to cinemas, theatres and shows in general.<sup>87</sup> This tax was justified, according to the Podestà, because those who ran (and profited from) cultural events, effectively benefited from the commercial and publicity campaigns organised by the local Tourist Office.<sup>88</sup> In a circular relationship, the Tourist Office supported cultural tourism in Venice, and the latter could therefore legitimately be taxed in favour of the former, an exchange that once again exposes the strong link existing between tourism and culture and between the commercial drive and the spiritual and artistic impulse.

As one may well imagine, however, strong opposition to the payment of the *Imposta di cura* was to be found amongst Venetian businessmen and entrepreneurs, even though supporting the local Tourist Office arguably benefited the entire community in the long term. As early as 1928, during one of the meetings of the *Consulta Municipale*, Antonio Revedin, manager of the *Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi*, demanded that no increase in tax levels be permitted, given that the hotel industry was already experiencing a 'painful crisis', forcing many establishments to reduce prices in order to attract customers.<sup>89</sup> In 1929, the Podestà considered granting tax breaks and exemptions to some theatrical productions,<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> See for instance, ASAC, Materiale da Riordinare, 'Ufficio Stampa-Amministrazione 1936'.

<sup>87</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Contribuzioni speciali di cura', trim. III, 1930, n. 2218.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 'Norme di esecuzione per le imposte e contribuzioni speciali per la Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo', trim. II, 1929, n. 2622.

<sup>89</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 14 November 1928.

<sup>90</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Norme di esecuzione per le imposte e contribuzioni speciali per la Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo', trim. II, 1929, n. 2622.

reflecting a general desire on the part of the central government to concern itself with the crisis afflicting Italian theatre as a whole.<sup>91</sup> By the same token, the Podestà, taking into account the stagnation of the Venetian theatre and cinema industries, as previously outlined by the Section for Theatrical and Cinematographic Industries of the Fascist Industrial Union, took the important decision to further reduce tax levels, on condition that entrepreneurial proprietors not use the tax relief simply to subsidise reduced admission fees.<sup>92</sup> As was the case with the 'popular trains' innovation (see below), the local hotel industry proved itself to be clearly business-oriented and narrowly self-interested, refusing to pay a local tax even if it was intended to promote the general well-being of tourism in the city. Given this self-serving (and possibly short-sighted) commercial perspective, one can imagine what the reaction would have been to the suggestion that private hotel-owners contribute financially to programmes designed to meet abstract ideological ends or to promote the spread of Fascist values.

With reluctance to accommodate local demands so marked within Venetian business circles, it is important to investigate attitudes towards taxation imposed by the central government. For instance, a similar situation developed when the Biennale administration tried to avoid payment of the centrally-imposed *Imposta di Ricchezza Mobile*.<sup>93</sup> This event is significant as it indicates the way in which the Biennale entourage wanted the institution to be perceived, as an organisation 'of essentially cultural and public utility that by statute [could] not have any profit-seeking goal'.<sup>94</sup> Because of this perception of the Biennale's special status as a 'non-profit body', the administration wished to see all salaries and income earned by Biennale personnel exempted from the *Imposta di Ricchezza Mobile* tax. Romolo Bazzoni, on behalf of the administrative committee, tried hard to make the case that the institution should enjoy exemption from taxation on account of its being 'a body of public right with no capital of its own and surviving on state and

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 'Finalità della Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo', trim. I, 1929, n. 2675.

<sup>93</sup> The *Imposta di Ricchezza Mobile* was a tax imposed on profits and salaries (tax on revenues).

<sup>94</sup> Romolo Bazzoni to the Minister of Finance, 3 April 1931, ASAC, Serie Materiale da Riordinare, 'Ufficio Stampa/Amministrazione 1931'.

local contributions'.<sup>95</sup> According to Bazzoni, not only did the Biennale retain important tasks in the artistic and cultural domains, it had also benefited the tourist development of the Venetian area in the latest decades. The creation of a proper art centre such as the Biennale, argued Bazzoni, represented a unique asset for the city of Venice.<sup>96</sup> Cultural benefits generated by the Biennale were much higher than the profits obtained. Most performances had produced revenues barely sufficient to cover expenses, and the books between January 1931 and December 1934 in fact revealed significant financial losses.<sup>97</sup> The Biennale leadership tried to defend its case in writing to the Provincial Tax Office, which, after a thorough investigation, came to the conclusion that the institution was indeed susceptible to legitimate taxation under the *Imposta di Ricchezza Mobile*.<sup>98</sup> Eventually the Biennale administration, after a last attempt in 1940 to reclaim past taxes,<sup>99</sup> was forced to accept that it was considered by the regime as a genuinely commercial rather than a purely cultural institution.

Again this highlights the existence of minor clashes between local aims (in this case of the Biennale) and national directives. While the Biennale administration had wished to portray itself as an institution fully devoted to the state, far from having any profits or self-interests, the state, on the other hand, seemed to appreciate the real nature of the organisation as a body with a life of its own, receiving annual contributions, and earning profits like any other business enterprise. On a general level, it was clear that the tourist institutions of Venice were directing their efforts towards supporting Venetian cultural events (one only has to think about the Tourist Office funding cultural practices), which in turn were required to sustain the tourist industry through taxation. However, this was not enough to guarantee that all entrepreneurs were community-minded at a local, let alone the national level. Material aims generally outweighed moral, communal, and

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. Along with declaring the 'Venetianness' or cosmopolitanism of the institution, the Biennale entourage, in that occasion, in order to please Rome, held that the Exhibition of International Arts, by its very nature, had always been a means of 'articulating Italianness' (AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Finalita' della Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo', trim. I, 1929, n. 2675).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

spiritual considerations.

## 2.5 Fascism and tourism in Venice: cultural events staged by Fascist organs

Having established that tourism was foremost among the motivations for staging cultural entertainment in Venice, and that the Venetian town council succeeded in tying its aspirations for economic development to the state's project of nationalisation of the masses through cultural tourism, this section will analyse the relations between the local branches of the National Fascist Party, the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* (OND), other Fascist organisations, and the cultural politics of Venice.

The Fascist *dopolavoro* network included cultural and leisure circles set up by the regime targeting the working class. The activities offered by the organisation, including outings and sports, in addition to traditional pastimes such as choral singing and amateur theatrics, were designed to 'instil in the workers a consciousness of the nation, a sense of duty, and a desire for harmony between labor and capital'.<sup>100</sup> Drama classes and swimming courses were amongst the first initiatives started in Venice by the OND.<sup>101</sup> According to Fincardi, the OND was already functioning in Venice in 1926, and was heavily involved in banking, hotels, insurance companies, firms, shops and other enterprises.<sup>102</sup>

De Grazia insists that the fact that the OND activity 'was commonly known as the *cultura dopolavoristica* throughout Fascist Italy only emphasizes the pervasive influence this single institution exercised within the society as a whole in the formation of a culture of consent'.<sup>103</sup> Yet, how did this institution function when caught between Fascism and local identities? Was it more concerned with forging consent to the regime or with enhancement of the Venetian population's everyday life? The study of various records demonstrates that Fascist bodies in Venice were willing to contribute to the common effort in favour of economic rebirth even within the broader ideological project of 'educating the masses'. Their activities were devoted to both the 'spiritual tutoring of the people' and material gains for the

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<sup>100</sup> De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, p. 29.

<sup>101</sup> Fincardi, 'Gli 'Anni Ruggenti' dell'antico leone', p. 450.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

local community (this could be a result of the fact that in the late 1920s, as claimed by De Grazia, 'the goals, programmes, and general tenor of the OND were still remarkably productivist'<sup>104</sup>).

For example, in 1936, the local division of the OND, pursuing its 'educational objectives for the people',<sup>105</sup> pleaded with the town council to subsidize preparations for the performance of the 'Resurrection of Christ' to be performed in St. Mark's Square the forthcoming July. After some consideration, the Podestà allocated 22,500 lire in favour of the play, intending, in his words, 'to instruct the masses and to benefit tourism'.<sup>106</sup> Along these guidelines, it is interesting to notice that the contribution was taken from the budget of the Venetian Tourist Office, and that the Podestà's decree bore the heading 'Tourism'.<sup>107</sup> The Provincial OND itself reported to the Prefect Carlo Catalano that the 'Resurrection of Christ', together with the Sword Championship, would attract 'thousands of Dopolavoro members towards Venice, [and] contribute to the revival of the tourist activity which [was] such an essential element of the city's everyday life'.<sup>108</sup>

As tourist services and the hotel industry were the primary beneficiaries of such performances, the Tourist Office was the natural choice to administer the events. In other words, the municipality was investing in those events, with the knowledge of a guaranteed monetary return.<sup>109</sup> Significantly, every cultural showcase staged by the OND in the 1930s was also financed by the Tourist Office.<sup>110</sup> Even a celebration such as the National Grape Festival, organised by the Ministry of Corporations, was put under the heading 'Tourism' on the Podestà's decrees. It is also striking to notice that alongside the various Fascist Provincial

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<sup>103</sup> De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, p. IX.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>105</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. La 'Resurrezione di Cristo' in Piazza San Marco', trim. III, 1936, n. 1489.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 49, busta 'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro'.

<sup>109</sup> By the same token, in 1937, the Podestà determined a settlement of 145,000 lire in favor of the Provincial Fascist Federation in order to prepare some cultural and charity events. According to the Podestà, they were expected to be financed 'with the novel profits of Venetian tourism' (AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Contributo a favore della Federazione Provinciale Fascista sui nuovi proventi del turismo veneziano', trim. III, 1937, n. 1816).

<sup>110</sup> See for instance, AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Manifestazioni organizzate dalla

Unions (merchants, sharecroppers, etc.) included in the festival's executive committee, there was also the Director of the Tourist Office.<sup>111</sup>

For Fincardi, under Fascism, Venice stood out amongst the other Italian communes. Precisely because tourism retained such a great importance, the celebration of traditions focused upon sea leisure activities and 'maritime symbols' rather than harvesting rituals which were instead confined to the hinterland. In the 1930s, Venice and the lagoon remained largely isolated from the Fascist celebration of 'ruralism', and the so-called 'Battle for Grain', and the Carnival ballads of the 'Festa dell'Uva' were never held in St. Mark's Square or the main *campi*.<sup>112</sup> For this reason, Mestre, on the mainland, soon acquired the image of the area's 'agricultural centre' –a paradox- as the town was rapidly developing and urbanizing around the industrial district of Marghera. It was Giovanni Giuriati, at the head of the Venetian PNF, who wished to promote the agricultural identity of Mestre, in contrast to the industrial project entailed by the *Greater Venice*.<sup>113</sup> Every time the Podestà determined annual contributions in favour of the OND to stage various cultural events and celebrations in Mestre, references to tourism virtually disappear, and the sole motivations taken into account were 'philanthropic aims' and 'education of the masses'.<sup>114</sup> Tourism and commerce no longer represented the main concern.<sup>115</sup> However, later on, as Mestre could not live up to expectations of agricultural development, it was decided that harvesting rituals should be gradually moved to Marcon, another community in the Veneto's hinterland.<sup>116</sup>

Every year, the OND arranged an outdoor film theatre in St. Mark's Square in order to stage films promoting 'Fascist and tourist propaganda' which were sponsored by the Venetian Tourist Office.<sup>117</sup> Yet, rather than Fascist propaganda,

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OND per la stagione 1939', trim. III, 1939, n. 2046.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Spese sostenute per la IX Festa Nazionale dell'Uva', trim. III, 1938, n. 2572.

<sup>112</sup> Fincardi, 'Gli 'Anni Ruggenti' dell'antico leone', p. 554.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Richiesta contributo pei festeggiamenti da svolgersi in Mestre', trim. III, 1936, n. 1764.

<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, expenses for festivals, fairs, plays and concerts staged outside Venice were not placed upon the books of the Venetian Tourist Office (Ibid, 'Richiesta contributo pei festeggiamenti da svolgersi in Mestre', trim. III, 1936, n. 1764).

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 6, busta 'OND Programmi e manifestazioni anni 1938-1939'.

the movies focused above all upon tourist capabilities and facilities offered by Venice and the Lido, as in a proper publicity venture. Cultural events, sightseeing spots and the enchanting atmosphere of the historic city were combined with the glamorous nightlife and the possibility of sea cures, so as to promote the multi-faceted character of the Venetian district. Transformed into an immense theatre, the 'aristocratic-bourgeois' St. Mark's Square became a host arena for the largest audiences in Venice, which gathered together to enjoy the modern rituals of mass entertainment.<sup>118</sup> The OND had to acquire projectors and screens of remarkable dimensions: 16x14 metres, the biggest in Italy. The equipment was mostly donated or borrowed from private patrons or the government in Rome. According to Fincardi, in past years, no similar use had been made of St. Mark's Square, and the possibility of employing its potential to 'modernise' the entire Venetian citizenry had been neglected.<sup>119</sup>

The words 'Fascism' and 'tourism' and the intersection of ideology and pragmatism summon up the essence of Fascist organisations operating in Venice such as the OND. Not surprisingly, *Le Tre Venezie* (a monthly review edited under the auspices of the Fascist Provincial Federation of Venice) which was used to popularise the image of Venice and the Lido as internationally renowned tourist sites, had initially been run by the *Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi*, largely responsible for Venetian tourist publicity.<sup>120</sup> In this case, Venetian Fascism had inherited a function which had traditionally belonged to the local hotel industry. According to Fincardi, mass entertainment in Venice in the 1930s usually fell under the influence of the OND which appealed to potential customers by offering low prices and discounts. An exception to this was represented by elite pastimes directly managed by the Ciga, the Biennale entourage or other exclusive circles that had nothing to do with the *Dopolavoro*, meaning that elite tourism in Venice played a great role, in spite of the recent development of mass tourism. However, the areas of intervention of the OND and the elite circles with their relevant cultural offerings were always well integrated together with the local entertainment calendar thanks

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<sup>118</sup> Fincardi, 'Gli 'Anni Ruggenti' dell'antico leone, p. 552.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Fincardi, 'Gli 'Anni Ruggenti' dell'antico leone', p. 452.



to the co-ordinating action of the Tourist Office.<sup>121</sup>

What is significant here is that local Fascism was sharing the same positions as the municipality, making an effort to fit in with the community outlook, and not being guided just by the needs of spiritual edification but also by the material elevation of the masses. In *The Culture of Consent*, De Grazia argued that the OND was utilised by the regime in the attempt to 'forge responsive constituencies, blunt worker resistance and gratify demands for consumption frustrated by its own wage policies'.<sup>122</sup> In Venice, too, losses on the shop floor for the worker determined by the regime, were compensated with alternative social policies. It is clear that the *Consulta Municipale* was financing cultural activities promoted by local Fascist organs to boost tourism. On the other hand, for the Venetian OND, encouraging tourism alongside the moral education of the population was vital if the necessary funds for its activities were to be obtained from the Podestà. Therefore, the 'educational' and 'tourist' functions were not antithetical, and no contrast was created between Venice and the central government. Indeed, for Fascist organisations in Venice, the annual habit of requesting financial aid to the town authorities (represented by the Tourist Office) in order to nurture 'the economic benefit resulting from the greatest tourist movement',<sup>123</sup> was a constant feature since the establishment of the regime.<sup>124</sup> Every year, the *Ente Provinciale per il Turismo* gathered together the members of 'those organisations in the local tourist activity' in order to reach agreement about the calendar of celebrations for the forthcoming tourist season. It is striking to notice that, in addition to members of the Venice municipality, guests usually included representatives of the Provincial *Dopolavoro*.<sup>125</sup>

At times, the Biennale administration and the Municipal Casino (founded in

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, p. IX.

<sup>123</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 16, busta 'Spettacoli, trattenimenti, pellicole cinematografiche'.

<sup>124</sup> According to De Grazia's *The Culture of Consent*, p. 210, 'Festivities were choreographed to involve the greatest possible civic participation. The central event –usually a procession– was truly spectacular, complete with displays of cult figures, costumed peasants, caparisoned horses and oxen, allegorical floats, or, as in Venice and the other seaside towns, regattas with illuminated boats. Numerous side events served to generate even more activity'.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

1936) were invited to contribute to the financing of OND events, indicating that these two bodies were to benefit from the creation of additional tourism in the city.<sup>126</sup> De Grazia herself claims that OND showcases were also frequently arranged with the support of local chambers of commerce, which viewed the festivals as the optimum means of boosting the tourist trade.<sup>127</sup>

This mixed approach, emphasising both spiritual and material gains for the local community was also reflected by the annual reports produced by the Provincial Fascist Federation of Commerce. The Federation aspired to 'turning local commerce into a harmonious cell within the Fascist corporatist state'.<sup>128</sup> It claimed that there was 'not a single problem concerning the Venetian economy that had not been dealt with'.<sup>129</sup> Not only was the Federation committed to enhancing Venetian economic activities, it also aimed at defending commercial businesses invested in the local area. Among various pursuits, the Federation took charge of staging several cultural events in order to improve commercial activities. For example, in 1932, it contributed to support choral concerts, music festivals, performances at the *La Fenice* Theatre, the International Boat Racing, sport competitions and the Venetian Carnival. In addition, it directly financed the Book Fair, the Toys Fair, the Grape Festival and the Peaches Festival.<sup>130</sup> The case of the Federation once again reinforces the thesis that culture was in the service of commerce and tourism, in other words, material aims.

On other occasions, art performances or local fairs staged by Fascist bodies were specifically arranged to immediately relieve shortfalls caused by the economic crisis. For example, in 1933, the Fascist Interprovincial Syndicate was granted the right by the Podestà to arrange opera sessions at the Theatre *La Fenice* from 26 December 1933 to 12 February 1934, when the Carnival was set up. Pieces to be performed were chosen from 'Il Crepuscolo degli Dei' by Wagner, 'Don Pasquale' by Donizetti, 'Falstaff' by Verdi, 'Mefistofele' by Boito, 'Boris Godunov' by

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<sup>126</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 6, busta 'OND, programmi e manifestazioni anni 1938-1939'.

<sup>127</sup> De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, p. 209.

<sup>128</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 49, busta 'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro'.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

Mussorsgkij, and three new works for Venice, 'Il Segreto di Susanna' by Wolf Ferrari, 'La Baronessa di Carini' by Mulè, and 'Il Finto Arlecchino' by Malipiero. Under the guidance of President Gino Damerini, the Syndicate in charge of running the lyric season claimed to be acting with 'artistic' goals uppermost, to the exclusion of 'commercial motivations'. Despite these protestations, however, the organisers openly admitted their aim of contributing to the relief of unemployment by recruiting 80 musicians for orchestra, 65 choristers, numerous young cantors, dancers and extras.<sup>131</sup> The Podestà granted 200,000 lire to the event, to be provided from the resources of the Tourist Office, the Provincial Administration, the *Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia Corporativa*,<sup>132</sup> the Provincial Federation of the *Fasci di Combattimento*, the Federation of Commerce, the *Cassa di Risparmio*, and other minor administrative bodies. Having praised the forthcoming event and committed himself to ensuring its success, the Podestà subsequently called for the support of similar initiatives which also served the purpose of boosting overseas tourism.<sup>133</sup>

From 1933 onwards, the OND took over the arrangement of the prestigious Carnival in St. Mark's Square and the Venetian *campi*,<sup>134</sup> staging a 'Colombina',<sup>135</sup> puppet descending from the clock tower, a *danza moresca*, some *forze d'Ercole* and horse racing, and celebrations and rituals of military power prepared during the *sabati fascisti* in the OND gyms.<sup>136</sup> According to Fincardi, the municipality, together with the OND, hoped to make use of the Carnival to revitalize the winter tourist season. However, the central government decided to put to a halt the initiative fearing that the luxurious and expensive Venetian costumes would appear inappropriate and insensitive at a time of widespread economic crisis. At the end of the 1930s, the Carnival only took place at the Venetian Fair of Santa Margherita

<sup>131</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Contributo per la stagione d'opera al Teatro *La Fenice* durante il Carnevale 1933-34', trim. IV, 1933, n. 2697.

<sup>132</sup> When the corporatist framework was set up in the 1926, the liberal Chamber of Commerce was replaced by the *Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia Corporativa*.

<sup>133</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Contributo per la stagione d'opera al Teatro *La Fenice* durante il Carnevale 1933-34', trim. IV, 1933, n. 2697.

<sup>134</sup> Venetian little squares.

<sup>135</sup> A typical Venetian mask.

<sup>136</sup> Fincardi, 'I fasti della "tradizione"', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1494.

and at the Riva degli Schiavoni.<sup>137</sup> Once again, this demonstrates the existence of disagreement between the aspirations of the Venetian Fascists and those of the central government.

Throughout the decade, the Podestà settled an annual contribution to the Provincial division of the OND, in favour of a series of concerts to be performed at the *Conservatorio Musicale Benedetto Marcello*. These events were considered ‘useful’ to Venice ‘as they attracted numerous visitors to the city’.<sup>138</sup> Also, they facilitated the recruitment of ‘local unemployed musicians in a period of the year when fewer job opportunities existed’.<sup>139</sup> By the same token, in 1938, the Prefect of Venice informed the Minister of Interior that the Provincial Fascist Federation was planning to arrange concerts to be performed in St. Mark’s Square during summer, an initiative that was expected to be popular with the public and foreign tourists alike, thereby ‘making an important contribution to the city’s profits’.<sup>140</sup> The Prefect also claimed that despite some citizens complaining about ‘the shameful waste of St. Mark’s Square’, the concerts not only helped to sustain the tourist industry, but acted for the ‘remarkable benefit of 500 people now in work for one month, who would otherwise be unemployed’.<sup>141</sup>

For Fincardi, the Venetian OND had, from its establishment, promoted only small, provincial and regional cultural events, making little effort towards the elimination of cultural parochialism; this in spite of the fact that by the end of the 1920s, ‘regionalism’ of this type had been effectively condemned as ‘heresy’ by the regime.<sup>142</sup> Similarly, De Grazia has argued that the Fascist regime, working through the OND, hoped to facilitate the formation of an ‘overriding national identity as opposed to regional or class identities’.<sup>143</sup> De Grazia concluded that

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> AMV, *Determinazioni Podestarili*, ‘Spesa di 5,000 lire quale contributo per l’esecuzione dei concerti organizzati dal Dopolavoro Provinciale di Venezia’, trim. II, 1937, n. 830.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, ‘Stagione di concerti 1937-38. Contributo di 5.000 lire al Dopolavoro Provinciale’, trim. III, 1937, n. 2680.

<sup>140</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 16, busta ‘Spettacoli, trattenimenti, pellicole cinematografiche’.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Fincardi, ‘I fasti della ‘tradizione’’, in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1496.

<sup>143</sup> De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, p. 151.

‘In its rhetoric and many of its programmes, the OND was thus especially concerned to emphasize its role as the organizer of a unified public – a new national base for the regime and a counter to the regionalistic and class based associationalism of the past (...). The most far reaching of these [OND directives] were concerned with the attempt to manipulate those tendencies, endemic to capitalist development, that would potentially cut across class and regional lines (...). The mass media, as truly modern forms of entertainment, had undeniable propagandistic value and because of their content was readily controlled by the State, they offered the regime a potential means of organising leisure on an entirely new ‘totalitarian’ basis’.<sup>144</sup>

However, a case study of Venice suggests that a rather different interpretation is plausible. Within an organisation such as the OND, regionalism and Venetian identity did indeed play a more important role than the simple confirmation of a unified national consciousness. As a result, the drive towards ‘nationalisation’ was not infrequently subjugated to the demands of the local perspective. In Venice, ideology occupied a less important place than pragmatism, and local Fascists were forced to acknowledge and eventually encourage Venetian cosmopolitanism as a central feature of the tourist industry upon which Venice depended.

Fincardi’s argument that the OND in Venice succeeded in its efforts to combine the leisure activities of the local population with the complex needs of the tourist industry is thus a convincing one. A programme of entertainment for the average citizen as well as the tourist was put together by the OND, and outside this framework more elite events were directly managed by the Ciga or other bourgeois institutions.<sup>145</sup> Fascist organs in the city combined their strategies for the education of the masses with the demands of local commercial and tourist interests. Their policies were visibly contingent upon the town’s social and economic needs, and were deeply immersed within the Venetian social *milieu*. For these reasons, it is difficult to accept uncritically the argument of De Grazia that the ‘*cultura*

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid, p. 164.

<sup>145</sup> Fincardi, ‘Gli ‘Anni Ruggenti’ dell’antico leone’, pp. 450-51.

*dopolavoristica*’ was intended primarily to perform ‘significant functions in legitimising Fascist rule’.<sup>146</sup> Eventually, De Grazia concedes that

‘The overwhelmingly local and regional nature of these manifestations reinforcing, at least in appearance, the solidarity and self-consciousness of specific communities, in some respects conflicted with the essentially national orientation of the fascist regime. Encouragement of popular identification with the state, the nation, or race was –no matter how ancient the resurrected ceremony- hardly to be found in a ‘revival of traditions’ based on regional or local distinctiveness’.<sup>147</sup>

## 2.6 The experiment of ‘popular trains’

In the 1930s, the regime proclaimed its intention of ‘going towards the people’.<sup>148</sup> While the previous decade it had established and strengthened the structures of the corporate state, now Fascism wished to further its grip on Italian society in order to achieve a broader consensus. For example, the OND range of activities was enlarged to meet the directives for the nationalisation of the masses emanating from state authorities. As for tourism, the regime aimed at making ‘Italy’ available to the masses by encouraging leisure activities and holiday-making, and exploiting its propaganda potential. At this time, travelling by train to Venice became an important new means for fostering mass tourism in the city, especially when the relative cheapness of the costs of rail travel are taken into account. The railways were themselves viewed as representative symbols of technology, speed and efficiency, all features of ‘modernity’ with which the regime was eager to identify itself.

Thus, a major new stimulus to mass tourism in Venice was provided by the renowned ‘popular trains’ (*treni popolari* or *treni turistici*) scheme promoted by the Minister of Communications, Costanzo Ciano, and inaugurated in August 1931. Italians were henceforth to be encouraged to visit Venice at discounted prices well

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<sup>146</sup> De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, p. 223.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, p. 214.

<sup>148</sup> Mussolini announced the strategy of ‘decisively reaching out to the people’ in a 1932 speech, ‘Al popolo Napoletano’, in *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, eds. Edoardo Susmel and Duilio Susmel, La Fenice, Florence, 1958.

within the means of the average family.<sup>149</sup> For the Fascist authorities, the popular trains clearly served as a commercial means to an ideological end as they enabled a much broader swathe of Italian society to travel around the country and grasp the true meaning of the spirit of 'Italianness' (and therefore of Fascism) that the authorities wished to instil.<sup>150</sup> Furthermore, and as De Grazia has astutely noted, the trains also represented important economic and political opportunities for the state:

'The popular trains resulted from Ciano's initiative, the outcome –as he frankly admitted– of a felicitous convergence of economic calculations and political considerations. The discounts on group travel of up to 50 percent were designed to boost mass transit, thereby reducing the huge deficit of the state railroads as revenues declined during the depression; at the same time they provided the urban unemployed and poor a brief respite from the dismal depression atmosphere of the cities (...). Accompanied by well-devised propaganda, the 'popular trains' quickly became a new national institution, celebrated in popular ditties by a lower-class public that previously, had rarely, if ever taken train trips for diversion. Between 2 August and 20 September 1931, more than half million travelers took advantage of the discounts.<sup>151</sup>

Tourists were also able to benefit from further reductions in local restaurants, hotels and museums.<sup>152</sup> In this way, the popular trains represented a major contribution to growth and expansion within the tourist economy of the Venetian area as a whole.<sup>153</sup>

For the authorities in Venice, the potential of the popular trains to provide a much-needed boost to the local economy far outweighed the importance of the Fascists' conception of the train as means of promoting awareness of the glories

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<sup>149</sup> AMV, Affari Generali del Comune di Venezia, quinquennio 1931-34, fascicolo XI/II/18, 'Relazione sull'attività svolta dal Comune nell'anno 1934'.

<sup>150</sup> According to De Grazia's *The Culture of Consent*, p. 184, 'The experience of the moment became fused with the image of the regime, rendered tangible through contact with the awesome potency of a new technology, the evocative sites of past patriotic feasts, and the symbol of Italy's future might'.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180-83.

<sup>152</sup> AMV, Affari Generali del Comune di Venezia, quinquennio 1931-34, fascicolo XI/II/18, 'Relazione sull'attività svolta nell'anno 1934'.

<sup>153</sup> Apparently, this kind of travel system was also put into being as the national government wished to stimulate the tourist movement from certain foreign countries. In 1934, for instance, popular trains from London and Budapest were afforded particular attention (AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Accoglienza e ospitalità ai partecipanti ai treni turistici di scambio', trim. I,

and greatness of the Italian nation and its heritage.<sup>154</sup> Further evidence to support this contention can be found in the correspondence between the *Consulta Municipale* and the national government in the 1930s. On 28 September 1931, the Podestà addressed Costanzo Ciano, reporting that Venice, like other Italian cities, was deeply grateful to the central government for the institution of the weekend trains to the lagoon, and that the entire citizenry felt similar enthusiasm.<sup>155</sup> A year later, the Prefect Bianchetti, backed by the Podestà and the Federal Secretary of the PNF, pressed Ciano to agree to the provision of 'Easter trains' to Venice over a ten day period at a discount of up to 75%. These trains, it was hoped, would help to offset any drop in the numbers of overseas tourists, this being a time when Venetians were 'seriously concerned with the decline of the international tourist trade'.<sup>156</sup> In 1936, the *Consulta* even ensured that the theatrical performance of Goldoni's 'Le Baruffe Chiozzotte' was arranged so as to be compatible with the timetables of the popular trains, thereby maximising the potential audience by taking advantage of those tourists coming from Florence and Rome, and helping to guarantee the greatest possible degree of commercial success.<sup>157</sup>

As a contemporary observer noticed, Venice had traditionally favoured the development of elite tourism in the lagoon before it was forced to come to terms with the economic crisis ushered in with the onset of the Great Depression.<sup>158</sup> Now that the recession was deepening, it had become necessary to appeal to sections of Italian society across the class spectrum in order to maintain the economic well being of the Venetian tourist industry.<sup>159</sup> However, it must be mentioned that in some cases the promotion of mass tourism in Venice and the ideological aspects of the popular trains did provoke certain kinds of resistance from the local mercantile interests. In this respect, the instance of the popular trains helps us to understand the ambiguous position of the *Consulta Municipale* and Venetian citizens towards the

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1934, n. 2341).

<sup>154</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 34, busta 'Smistamento treni popolari in arrivo a Venezia'.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 'Treni popolari e semi-popolari'.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Giannino Omero Gallo, 'Goldoni, immortale poeta di Venezia, onorato ed esaltato nelle strade della sua città', *Roma*, 13 July 1936.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.



spread of mass tourism in the city.

On 17 February 1932, Teodoro Bolla, President of the Provincial Federation of Commerce of Venice wrote to Domenico Giuriati, deputy in Parliament, complaining that tourist flows towards Venice had virtually ceased because of the mounting economic crisis and several monetary barriers. According to Bolla, it was vital to reinstate those 'popular trains' which had brought so many benefits to the city during the past season. The official was also of the opinion that the quality of the popular train system could be dramatically improved through the modernization of certain services and facilities. Trains could be labelled 'semi-popular' instead of 'popular', by adding second class carriages to the existing third class cars. Following from this, it would be logical to provide discounts for second and first class hotel accommodation and not merely for rooms in the third class hotels.<sup>160</sup> Bolla saw the initial success of the popular trains as a platform from which to expand to the ultimate advantage of Venice's tourist economy. He recognised that in 1931, those trains had favoured working class travellers who had benefited most from the various reductions. The same could not be said for those tourists belonging to the 'petty bourgeoisie, more endowed with cultural capital and perhaps a greater desire to appreciate the cultural heritage of the Italian nation, but who [were] less keen on travelling on third class carriages'. Bolla asked Giuriati to form a committee to discuss the matter, including representatives of the *Consulta Municipale* and the *Consorzio Alberghi e Pensioni Venezia e Lido*, alongside those of the travel agencies and the National Railway Society.<sup>161</sup>

Nevertheless, there were elements within Venetian commercial circles who were not entirely satisfied with the results brought by the popular trains, especially those businessmen running luxurious hotels and restaurants (a by no means insignificant proportion of Venice's hoteliers).<sup>162</sup> At the end of the 1932 summer season, Guido Casattini, president of the *Consorzio Alberghi e Pensioni Venezia e*

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<sup>160</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 34, busta 'Smistamento treni popolari in arrivo a Venezia'.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> According to Fincardi, when the 'Lictor' bridge over the lagoon was inaugurated on 25 April 1933, many Venetians, following the considerable tourist increase of the mid 1920s worried about a possible invasion of Venice from masses of tourists, especially those less economically endowed (Fincardi, 'I fasti della 'tradizione'', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1489).

*Lido*, addressed the Prefect of Venice and thanked him for having benefited summer tourism to the lagoon through the institution of the popular trains, and praising the undoubted contribution made to the reduction of unemployment in the Venetian district. Yet, at the same time, he argued that the accompanying discounts granted in hotels and restaurants had meant that many businesses could not be said to have made any tangible profit, and that the travel and tourist discounts had simply served the purpose of keeping them financially above water at a time of crisis.<sup>163</sup> The Podestà, on behalf of the Tourist Office in Venice, wrote to the Provincial Federation of Commerce with concerns about the ways in which the discount systems had been operating. The Federation had agreed reduced prices for the users of the popular trains with some Venetian hotels for the *Corpus Domini* celebrations (from the tourist point of view, the Holy Year, in 1925, had proved a great financial success and the Federation wished to repeat the experiment).<sup>164</sup> However, the Tourist Office reported that many travellers who had reached Venice by popular train found that they were denied the agreed reductions by several hotels and bed-and-breakfasts, leading to a number of complaints. The Podestà added that he might in future be forced to cancel the popular trains/accommodation discounts formula 'because of the inability of the local hotel industry to live up to the expectations of tourists'.<sup>165</sup>

Again, in 1938, a certain ambivalence on the part of local tourist interests to the emerging mass tourism in Venice could be detected. That year, the Podestà reported to the Prefect outlining the previous efforts made by the Venetian authorities to establish the popular trains as a means of alleviating the effects of economic crisis. However, by 1938, the worst ravages of the depression seemed to be over, and with tourist numbers rising once again, some Venetians wished to put an end to the experiment of popular trains. According to the Podestà, 'the hotel industry in Venice now wished only to work towards elite tourism', a commercial priority that clearly ran up against the popular trains project which was aimed at

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<sup>163</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 34, busta 'Treni popolari e semi-popolari'.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

promoting the tourism of the lower classes.<sup>166</sup> Little attention was paid to the stated aim of the Fascist regime to favour, first and foremost, the development of mass tourism for ideological purposes. This group of Venetian hoteliers were more interested in appealing to those social classes most suitable to their own businesses, leading them towards a clash of interests not simply with the Fascist authorities, but also with those in Venice who did indeed favour the growth of mass tourism for monetary reasons. For the Fascists, ideological and economic implications were to go hand in hand, but for some Italian citizens, their own private commercial interests far outweighed the regime's propagandistic concerns. In this instance, the Podestà, bowing to pressure from Rome, was forced to reject the request made by the hotel industry to reduce the popular trains service to Venice.<sup>167</sup>

From these events, it is nevertheless clear that the possibility of embracing mass tourism in Venice was intrinsically linked to the need to find a feasible solution to the economic crisis, regardless of the Regime's wish 'to go towards the people'. However, once the worst of the crisis was thought to be over, the traditional trading class wished to focus once again upon its conventional market – exclusive tourism. After all, it was to the elite tourists that Venice had sought to appeal since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before Fascism had come to power, and the local hotel industry saw no reason to discontinue those customs simply because of the current ideological infatuations of the central authorities in Rome. Ultimately, many considered that the fulfilment of the peculiar economic interests of Venice had little in common with the regime's objective of achieving the 'fascistization' of society through modern tourism. Tourist strategies adopted in the city would, from time to time, need to be different from the ideologically determined tourist directives handed down by the state. Many Venetians were of the opinion that tourist policy ought to be tailored to fit the practical needs of the local economy and its hotel sector rather than Fascist propaganda, consensus-building, or national economic strategies.

Viewed in this light, the case of the popular trains provides another striking example of the conflict of interests between regional/local identity and national

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

identity, and of the clash between consolidated tourist traditions and the requirements of the new ideological state. It is also a significant indication that a self-proclaimed 'totalitarian' regime was in fact incapable of living up to the 'ideal type' totalitarian model. Instead, there existed discernible fractures between the central government's directives and the ways in which they were interpreted and implemented by local authorities. Here, perhaps, David Forgacs' concept of 'flawed totalitarianism' is useful.<sup>168</sup> Ideology and propaganda never totally penetrated the essence of cultural tourism in Venice, eventually losing out to the strength of the entrenched customs and traditions of a city whose very identity was defined by the needs of commerce and the tourist industry in particular.

## **2.7 Boosting tourism: modern tourist techniques adopted in Venice**

The cosmopolitan public that frequented Venice during the May-June and August-October tourist seasons was envisaged as an elegant public, refined and fond of cultural activities, above all exhibitions. It was for the benefit of such visitors, to facilitate their enjoyment of the Twentieth Biennale of International Arts and Venice's other artistic, sporting and social events in the summer 1936, that the Biennale administration and the Tourist Office issued special guidebooks including reduced travel and cumulative entrance tickets.<sup>169</sup>

As in mainstream business practice, the habit of setting up 'joint ventures' between the different services and events became a defining feature of Venetian cultural tourism in the 1930s. Travel discounts and entrance reductions represented the cornerstone of the new commercial enterprises. With the purchase of a single ticket, holidaymakers were entitled to travel to Venice and partake of selected events at discounted prices throughout the summer.<sup>170</sup>

In some cases, commercial ventures were arranged between the historic city and the Lido. In 1937, a major business agreement was reached between the

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Forgacs (ed.), 'Introduction', in *Rethinking Italian Fascism*, p. 8.

<sup>169</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, 'Riduzioni ferroviarie 1936'. In July 1936, the travel agent 'Adriatica' of Budapest ordered as many as thirty of these booklets for its customers, planning to organise a full service of transport, accommodation, leisure and information (Ibid).

<sup>170</sup> See for instance, AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Estate Veneziana', trim. II, 1933, n. 1042.

Tintoretto Exhibition in Venice, and the Cinema Festival and the International Boat Racing at the Lido.<sup>171</sup> For the occasion, the Ministry of Communications issued travel discounts to Venice at up to 50% of the normal ticket price from 23 June to 19 September 1937. The period until 31 July benefited the Tintoretto Exhibition while the second period, until 19 September, was geared towards the promotion of the Biennale Cinema Festival and the International Boat Racing, and included a 'seaside reduction' for accommodation at the Lido, with a minimum stay of six days. Tickets were not valid for return if not countersigned by the Tourist Office in Venice. Therefore, profits in favour of the different events were calculated according to the respective periods of fare reductions.<sup>172</sup> Ultimately, what mattered to the municipal Tourist Agency was that the various activities and events included on the tourist calendar were making a profit.<sup>173</sup>

On other occasions, mutual strategies were adopted amongst events in various Italian cities. A common example was the joint venture between the Venice Biennale, the Milan Triennale, the International Book Fair in Florence, and other exhibitions in Turin. Writing to the administration of the Biennale, Enrico Bemporad, President of the Executive Committee of the International Book Fair in Florence, claimed that a public attracted by the prospect of a cumulative discount could be enticed into visiting all four exhibitions, and that this cumulative enterprise would lead to 'further profits in the books of the individual events'.<sup>174</sup>

The project of tourist development in Venice could not have been successfully carried out without the effort made by the Venetian municipality and its Tourist Agency in the adoption of modern promotional and publicity techniques to sustain tourism and attract audiences. In keeping with the regime's objective of 'going towards the people', Venice set out to appeal to a wider public by improving its tourist facilities, and by offering discounts on various tourist services. For example, in the 1930s, major advertising campaigns were encouraged both inside and outside the Italian borders. The Podestà himself used his position to issue

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Vidimazione biglietti ferroviari a riduzione anno 1937', trim. II, 1937, n. 1865.

<sup>172</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 34, busta 'Riduzioni ferroviarie pel 1936-Riscossione quote dai viaggiatori'.

<sup>173</sup> ASAC, Segreteria/Arti Visive, 'Corrispondenza 1935'.

<sup>174</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, 'Ferrovie 1928'.

decrees ordering the local Tourist Agency to advertise major publications both in Italy and abroad.<sup>175</sup> According to the *Consulta Municipale*, this form of publicity was ‘particularly suitable for attracting an international tourist crowd to the *Stazione di Cura Soggiorno e Turismo*’.<sup>176</sup> Each year, the local council together with the Tourist Agency organised a competition for the design of a promotional poster publicizing the splendour of Venice and the Lido.<sup>177</sup> The event was considered important enough to merit a judging panel drawn from the Biennale entourage and including acclaimed painters such as Ettore Tito and Italo Brass.<sup>178</sup> The Podestà also encouraged Venetian hotels and hostels to produce lists detailing their prices and facilities in order to enable the tourist authorities to provide information and reply to specific enquiries from overseas tourist agencies and ordinary citizens’.<sup>179</sup>

From 1930, great energy was devoted to the conception of an ‘illustrated and cosmopolitan’ Venetian periodical.<sup>180</sup> In 1934, the Tourist Office printed as many as 300,000 copies of a local tourist guidebook, published in four languages and including all kinds of information about communications, travel, accommodation, sport and amenities.<sup>181</sup> As for publicity material intended for non-Italian audiences, the Podestà urged the tourist authorities to take into account ‘those countries which showed the greatest interest towards Venetian tourism such as Germany, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland, Britain, America, France, Spain,

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<sup>175</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Turismo. Inserzioni reclamistiche su giornali in Italia e all’estero’, trim. I, 1930, n. 157. Regulations concerning major tourist publications in Venice were quite strict. For instance, on 10 October 1938, the Prefect warned the Directors of the reviews *Le Tre Venezie*, *Lido-Venezia* and *Viaggi C.I.T.* that the Minculpop (Ministry of Popular Culture) had expressed its desire that all the programmes of celebrations of tourist nature were approved by the *Ente Provinciale per il Turismo* before being printed with any relevant comment (ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 4, busta ‘Programmami di stagioni e manifestazioni di carattere turistico’).

<sup>176</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Materiale Pubblicitario della Stazione di Cura Soggiorno e Turismo’, trim. II, 1930, n. 158.

<sup>177</sup> Usually the poster portrayed a Venetian landscape paired with the image of a bourgeois woman wearing luxury clothes and jewels. Few sentences and bold colors publicized the historic city and its glamorous beach.

<sup>178</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Cartello reclame Venezia-Lido’, trim. I, 1930, n. 327.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, ‘Elenco alberghi e pensioni Venezia-Lido’, trim. II, 1929, n. 1862.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, ‘Contributo 1930 per l’uscita di un periodico veneziano illustrato e poliglotta’, trim. I, 1930, n. 159.

<sup>181</sup> AMV, Affari Generali del Comune di Venezia, quinquennio 1931-34, fascicolo XI/II/18, ‘Relazione sull’attività svolta dal Comune nell’anno 1934’.

Poland, Romania, Holland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway'.<sup>182</sup> The placing of various advertisements in the foreign press was regarded as a particularly valuable means of overseas publicity.<sup>183</sup> Germany was the foreign nation where the greatest effort was made (possibly the result of ideological affinities) and in 1934, promotional material for Venice was published in more than fifteen German newspapers.<sup>184</sup> In order to create a sophisticated publicity network outside Italy to deal with tourist promotion and related information services, the local council established distinct branches of the Tourist Office, each responsible for different foreign countries.<sup>185</sup> Moreover, annual contributions were paid into the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Berlin 'for propaganda'<sup>186</sup> to spread in Germany in favour of the Venetian *Stazione di Cura* via suitable forms of publicity'.<sup>187</sup> Another means of achieving tourist publicity was Venetian participation in various national and international tourist fairs.<sup>188</sup> Tourist exhibitions in the 1930s were ordered by the *Direttorio Generale* of the *Ente Nazionale Industrie Turistiche* with the aim of grouping major Italian resorts together within a kind of tourist 'Stock Exchange'<sup>189</sup> and, according to the Podestà, provided 'outstanding propaganda for the Venice's various and complex tourist interests'.<sup>190</sup>

In this way, the commodification<sup>191</sup> of culture was complete. The Biennale of International Arts was simply part of tourist packages offered for sale by various travel agencies. In short, the exhibition and other Venetian cultural events were available for purchase as tourist products, with a consequential strengthening of the

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Inserzioni reclamistiche su giornali esteri', trim. II, 1929, n. 1731.

<sup>184</sup> AMV, Affari Generali del Comune di Venezia, quinquennio 1931-34, fascicolo XI/II/18, 'Relazione sull'attività svolta dal Comune nell'anno 1934'.

<sup>185</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Agenzie fiduciarie della Stazione di Cura presso le sedi della Cosulich e del Lloyd Triestino', trim. II, 1929, n. 1732.

<sup>186</sup> It is important to note that the use of the word 'propaganda' in these municipal records was just another term for 'publicity' and carried no ideological meaning.

<sup>187</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Contributo alla Camera di Commercio Italo-Germanica per pubblicità', trim. II, 1929, n. 1733.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Partecipazione a fiere e a mostre', trim. II, 1936, n. 1255.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Partecipazione all'Esposizione di Montecassino', trim. II, 1929, n. 1865.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Partecipazione all'Esposizione Internazionale di Anversa e Liegi 1930', trim. I, 1930, n. 5851.

<sup>191</sup> By 'commodification' it is meant not just the process of transforming raw materials into the finished object but also the practice by which a good is consumed by consumers. When culture is bought by cultural consumers it becomes a article of trade, a commodity, too (it is commodified).

relationship between art and commerce. Tourist practices adopted to sell exhibitions, concerts, theatre plays, place the emphasis on the pragmatic side of cultural tourism rather than the cultural capital (and ideology) incorporated by these events.

## 2.8 Cultural tourism in the war years

In the late 1930s, the Fascist regime, confronted by the European political crisis, embarked upon a more radical programme of propaganda and coercion.<sup>192</sup> Even so, the evidence suggests that only very rarely did the Venetian *Consulta* dwell on the content of local cultural representations to be staged in the city, as long as it was accepted that they suited the established tastes of the desired audience. Acclaimed authors such as Goldoni and Shakespeare would always draw large audiences.<sup>193</sup> That 'Othello' by Shakespeare was conceived of as a potentially profitable tourist attraction, in spite of the increasingly Anglophobic political climate can be seen in the Podestà's ruling that the municipality, 'in order to bring to Venice the usual number of foreign visitors, without which the citizens' interest would be severely damaged, should coordinate the year's summer schedule with art events to be staged in the Palazzo Ducale, one of these being 'Othello' by Shakespeare'.<sup>194</sup> Perhaps informing the Podestà's decision was a recollection of the enthusiastic critical acclaim with which Max Reinhardt's earlier production of 'The Merchant of Venice' had been received.<sup>195</sup>

In a similar vein, on 21 March 1939, Volpi informed the Biennale committee members of his proposal once again to include Shakespeare's 'Othello'

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<sup>192</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 16.

<sup>193</sup> In 1936, the newspaper *Il Giornale d'Italia* declared: 'Everyone can understand which source of beauty, which element of cultural propaganda and tourist attraction could represent the institution of a stable venue of goldonian performances periodically arranged, especially when this venue is called Venice' (Zajotti, 'Il Ventaglio e Le Baruffe Chiozzotte di Goldoni in Campo San Zaccaria e a San Cosmo della Giudecca', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 21 June 1936).

<sup>194</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Eventi dell'estate veneziana 1936', trim. IV, 1936, n. 2365.

<sup>195</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 28 January 1935. As a Jew, Reinhardt's status as a great artistic innovator was threatened when Hitler came to power. The Nazis began to expropriate his theatres in Germany, and he was subsequently forced to leave the country to emigrate to America in 1934. However, in Italy anti-Semitism was not so virulent as to prevent this kind of production and in



and ‘Il Campiello’ by Goldoni, both directed by Renato Simoni, in the forthcoming Theatre Festival (Volpi apparently also considered staging Browning’s ‘The Barrett Family’ in the court of Palazzo Rezzonico before deciding against it on the grounds that ‘the play’s success would be uncertain’ – a conclusion which had nothing to do with any ideological consideration).<sup>196</sup> Later that day, Vilfrido Casellati, President of the Province of Venice, asked Volpi whether public interest towards the Biennale art exhibition had lessened or expanded in recent months. Volpi expressed a belief that it had indeed diminished, but professed himself unable to provide a precise explanation for the apparent decline. Maraini, addressing Casellati, put forward the view that the falling off in interest might be explicable with reference to the recent development of the Lido beach resort, the popularity of which meant that many tourists did not return to the mainland until the end of the summer season.<sup>197</sup> Volpi, however, showed no willingness to consider closing down the fine art exhibition. On the contrary, he announced that it was his intention to extend the duration of the Biennale in order to give it a higher profile during the tourist season.

In 1940, with the crisis in Europe reaching a seeming *denouement* with the fall of France, Italy followed in Germany’s aggressive footsteps and announced itself ready to enter the war. Perhaps surprisingly, however, with the global economy fragmenting and suffering as a direct result of the conflict in Europe, it appears that Venice continued to produce and promote its all-year round celebrations and amusements in an apparently light-hearted atmosphere. An article appearing in the New York Herald in the same year illustrated the sense of Venetian detachment from the destructive events unfolding in Europe and demonstrates the apparent continuity in the strategies of the town’s tourist industry. The article is worth quoting at some length:

Venice offers an enchanting programme for the 1940 season, but merely to be in Venice is in itself enchanting. The artistic programme includes, naturally, the XXII Art

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Venice, cosmopolitanism and internationalism were far more important. It was on occasions such as this that the city demonstrated an internationalism far beyond mere Italian nationalism or Fascism.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid, session 21 March 1939.

<sup>197</sup> The Music Festival had traditionally been the least profitable off all the major Biennale events, partly because it was the last event of the season (held in September) and many tourists tended to leave Venice as soon as the cinema festival at the Lido had been completed.

Biennale, inaugurated on 1 June with the usual picturesque procession by water to the Public Gardens where, in Italian and foreign pavilions until October 1 the art most representative of the world's modern mediums of expression will be on view. Especially interesting is the musical, theatrical and cinema programme. From June 11 to 14, in the Piazza San Marco, the 'Resurrection of Christ' by Perosi, will be presented. On July 15 to 31, open-air performances of the Venetian comedian Goldoni are scheduled. From August 4 to 9, open-air productions of Wolf-Ferrari's opera 'Campiello' and Pick-Mangiafalli's Casanova ballet will be delightful events. The musical programme will be complemented by the International Musical Festival of the Biennale from September 1 to 15, at which a special feature is a Hungarian company specialising in concerts and ballets at the Fenice Theater, itself one of the exquisite gems of 16<sup>th</sup> century architecture. The Fourth International Cinema Art Congress at the Excelsior Lido from August 10 to 31, with premieres and showings of cinematic masterpieces, will mean three absorbing weeks to cinema-lovers and film enthusiasts. Although full details are as yet not forthcoming, it is said that Paramount is to contribute a colour version of the 'Trail of the Lonesome Pine,' starring Sylvia Sydney, among its other offerings.

The characteristic Venetian water festivals are always a charm of Venice. The three of special historical significance are the Feast of the Redentore on the night of July 18; the festival on the Grand Canal on the night of August 22, and the Gondoliers Regatta on the afternoon September 6. The Redentore has been celebrated annually almost without interruption for more than 500 years. On these occasions, the Giudecca Canal is a living patchwork of light, fireworks and fun. As a surviving illustration of Italian tradition it's only possible rival is Siena's Palio. The Grand Canal festival is of more modern origin, but nevertheless provides a splendid illumination of palaces, bridges, myriad brilliant barges, gondolas and every sort of water craft, together with various choral and other concerts. The Regatta is an absorbing festival in which royalty, high society and the people all participate. The traditional gilded *bissone*, gondoliers in bright satin uniforms, precede the racing boats, and a member of the royal family presents the prizes, including for the fourth winner a live pig. On August 16, the Murano quarter, famous for its glass and lace industries, has a Gondoliers' Regatta of its own which also attracts many Venetian visitors.

Sporting events begin with the eighth International Motorboat race from Pavia to Venice on June 14. The International Golf Tournaments are, as usual, scheduled for September. From August 31 to September 6, the Tennis tournaments at the courts of the Excelsior Hotel are held. From September 13 to 15, the VIII Motorboat Concourse is held on the lagoons, and from September 14 to 19, golf competitions at the Alberoni links. Other special events scheduled for the season are the 'Light Extravaganza' at the Lido on July 11; the 'Festival of the Full Moon' in the Piazza San Marco on August 1; a Fashion Show at the Excelsior Lido on July 24 and 25; a Venetian Agricultural Exhibition from

August 1 to 15; and the usual cultural courses for Italians and foreigners to be held at Ca' Foscari from September 1 to 30 under the auspices of the Inter University Institute'.<sup>198</sup>

This article is significant as it shows that despite mounting xenophobia, an increasingly autarchic political atmosphere, and a period of deteriorating international relations (with consequent negative effects for the Biennale and the number of tourists visiting Venice), the city maintained its commitment to the cultural and tourist domain. With Venice reliant upon tourism, it is hardly surprising that the authorities eschewed an aggressive ideology in favor of the preservation of their own traditional economic interests. War and tourism were incompatible, and clearly the Venetian ruling class would have preferred the maintenance of a healthy tourist trade over and above a Fascist war. Even with the outbreak of an economically detrimental conflict, the vital imperative was to maintain the summer season to the greatest extent possible. The account cited above clearly demonstrates that Venice sought to promote its tourist agenda without reference to any warlike climate. On the contrary, the tourist publicity seems to have been specifically tailored to distract attention from the war, precisely because war was too hard to incorporate into the Venetian culture of cosmopolitanism.

If we compare the 1940 summer calendar with its 1931 predecessor (see section 2.1), we find that in 1940 surprisingly little had changed. If anything, the programme was expanded and enriched in 1940, revealing an ongoing wartime loyalty to the summer season's tourist events (as the *New York Herald* stated above, the Redentore had been held, almost without interruption every year for five centuries).<sup>199</sup> The municipality's intention was clearly to continue promoting

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<sup>198</sup> 'Water Festivals, art and sports events fill brilliant Venetian summer calendar', *New York Herald*, 26 May 1940.

<sup>199</sup> Bosworth also gives this significant account about Venice in the war years: 'Even in the summer of 1942, Venice's high society appeal had not entirely been surrendered. Inevitably, the XXIII Biennale attracted fewer spectators than its predecessors had done but it was still open, and commentators assured their readers that the surviving clientele was more select and knowledgeable than before the war. In Piazza San Marco, music could still be heard, although it was now on occasion provided by the Hermann Goring Regimental (who played Bach and Liszt). More grandiose tourist events had not been cancelled. The 'Theatre of 4,000' opened, this time in Campo San Polo, under the auspices of Minculpop and with the promise that it offered 'the chance for all to attend performances which hitherto were reserved to a narrow group of privileged beings'. Ordinary people, it was said, could then express the 'enthusiasm of this simple and open souls, beating at every expression of beauty'. *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Aida* and *Tosca*, 'the music of our great men, the

tourism, despite the unfavorable international atmosphere, in the hope that the effects of the war would not seriously damage the Venetian economy. In this respect, Volpi's speech to the Biennale Committee in 1941 is highly significant. He began with a demand for the revival of the summer season through the launching of outdoor film screenings as part of the Cinema Festival before going on to ask the Podestà to ensure that the events scheduled by the town council were not timed to coincide with any film showings at the cinema exhibition.<sup>200</sup> This indicates that Volpi's business-like attitude and pragmatic commercial approach was maintained in spite of the wider national development of a Fascist war climate.

## 2.9 The ambiguous relationship between the Venetian administration and the state

In this chapter, it has been argued that the tourist movement was crucial for the well-being of the Venetian district, especially in times of prolonged economic crises. For this reason, of the two functions of tourism outlined by Mussolini in the 1930s – ideological and economic – the latter was far more important than the former in the eyes of the local authorities, and the cultural showcase events staged in Venice were primarily understood as a contribution to the local economy. From this perspective, it was entirely logical that the Tourist Office should be so heavily involved in the organisation and production of cultural events, and that the municipality was constantly on the lookout for exciting new ideas to enrich the summer tourist calendar. Concerts, exhibitions, plays and local festivals were always assessed in terms of their contribution to the tourist trade and their

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real, magnificent music of our 'geniuses', would lift the hearts of every audience. Art, too, was still displayed. In the summer of 1942, Venice acted as host to an exhibition of popular religious art. Volpi and the Duke of Genoa were present at its formal lunch, emphasizing the special inspiration which had been given to contemporary religious art by the 'crusade' against the USSR. Conferences were still held – one was organized by the critics of religious art for example – while the 'Friends of Japan' advertised a lecture series. Later in the year, a Croatian Exhibition opened, luring visitors with a martial statue of *Vojvoda* by Ante Pavelić. So, too, did an exhibition of 'female activity' which displayed the 'many tiny skills' of 'the perfect housewife'. Regattas were held. There was even another cinema festival, the tenth since 1932, which Volpi declared would illuminate once again 'how Venice had learned to become a centre of formidable economic interest and power, while demonstrating that Italy, despite the heavy burden of its war effort, still had time for art'. Pavolini and Goebbels arrived to prove his point' (Bosworth, 'Venice, 1911-45', pp. 16-17).

<sup>200</sup> ASAC, Serie Verballi delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 12 May 1941.

consumer potential in a cosmopolitan tourist market. For this reason, they were always more likely to prioritise commercial appeal over ideological factors. Even in wartime, Venice attempted to maintain its own traditions of tourism, leisure activities and open-air pastimes and to seek to transcend the autarchy and extreme nationalism of the Fascist ideologues.

Griffin has argued that Fascism ‘means propaganda on a massive scale, the radical overhaul of education and academic life, and the reshaping of cultural life both at the level of ‘high art’ and of popular culture and leisure’.<sup>201</sup> However, the case of Venice reveals that the regime’s efforts to ‘fascistize’ cultural life in the region was only partially effective with regard to the attitudes of Venetian elites towards the town’s cultural activities. At best, ‘fascistization’ simply overlapped with the profitable use of culture in favour of tourism. Ultimately, practical economic considerations continued to intrude into what might otherwise have been an exclusively ideologically-driven sphere.<sup>202</sup>

Even when Fascist organs such as the local section of the OND were involved in the preparation of cultural activities, regionalism, Venetian identity and the promotion of tourism still retained their importance. As for the Venetian elites, several local businessmen demonstrated a blatant self-interest and disregard for the state’s ideological objective of expanding mass tourism in the city if this was seen to run against the grain of their own business interests.

The case of the ‘popular trains’ is a particularly clear point at which the potential for clashes between the Fascist state and the Venetian tourist industry was exposed and is an example which illustrates the dissonance between local understanding of cultural tourism and the priorities of the Fascist regime. In this respect, Bosworth’s words are significant:

‘And what, too, of the summer festivals, the *Redentore*, the regattas, the art, cinema and music Biennali and many of the exhibitions? They undoubtedly did contain and express some elements of Fascism. But it was not a reliable or consistent Fascism, one which transmuted its audiences’ souls and liquidated there the vestiges of liberalism, or Catholicism, or localism, or cosmopolitanism, or many another non-Fascist idea. Though it

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<sup>201</sup> Griffin, ‘Staging the Nation’s Rebirth’, in Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre*, p. 17.

was hard fully to accept the arguments of historians who aver that all politics is mere surface, a shadow-play of the 'real' social world, this glimpse of Venetian history reveals a host of long-term structures that challenge the notion of a wholly affirmed Fascist or cultural revolution. By this account, in the years from 1911 to 1945, Venice remained in most ways itself, more drawn to the sacralization of leisure than to that of Fascist life'.<sup>203</sup>

The evidence provided above makes a compelling case for the need to separate the history of Venice from a monolithic history of Italian Fascism. It is clear that the interlinked cultural and economic interests and objectives of Venice bred a unique local mentality which, while compatible with many elements of Fascism and capable of coexisting with Fascist rule, should not be thought of as a simple variant of Fascist ideology or an unquestioning servant of the values and ideals of the Fascist regime. The main argumentative thrust of this chapter has been to suggest that, in many respects, Fascism was only a passing episode in the secular history of Italian and Venetian tourism.

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<sup>202</sup> Bosworth, 'Tourist planning in Fascist Italy', p. 17.

<sup>203</sup> Bosworth, 'Venice, 1911-45', p. 19.

### 3. Giuseppe Volpi and the development of cultural tourism in Venice

This chapter examines the role played by Giuseppe Volpi as the foremost example of a Fascist businessman and public figure acting as a mediator between the world of national politics and the representatives of Venice's own aspirations of economic revival. Volpi's rise to prominence under Fascism was connected both to the project to bring about the overall transformation of the Veneto area into a modern productive district undertaken in the 1920s and 1930s, and to the development of cultural tourism as a staple Venetian industry in the historic town and the Lido.

Volpi's entrepreneurial spirit gave rise to the Music Festival in 1930, followed by the Film Festival in 1932, the Poetry Conventions of 1932 and 1934, and the Theatre Festival in 1934.<sup>1</sup> The redefinition of cultural tourism that came with the birth of the new Biennale festivals and the establishment of the industrial harbour of Porto Marghera, both sprang from Volpi's willingness to reshape the economic destinations of the Venetian area. As the exploitation of cultural tourism emerged as the only viable alternative left to the city of Venice, cultural events came to acquire an overtly commercial function. As a result, Volpi's approach to both industrial issues and Biennale cultural activities was characterised by pragmatism and mercantile awareness. For Volpi, both had to prove their economic viability if they were to merit the backing of the Venetian business elites.

The case of the Biennale Music and Theatre festivals demonstrates that when cultural showcases did not fulfil their commercial function properly (i.e. they were not deemed to be sufficiently profitable), Volpi tended to abandon them, regardless of any contribution they might make to the moral benefit for the population. In a city that was living upon the profits generated by tourism, all related activities were expected to give a fundamental contribution, and were treated as businesses that should abide by business rules. As both the creator of Porto Marghera and the President of the *Ente Autonomo Biennale*, Volpi established himself as the 'co-ordinator' of the Venetian economy in the post-

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<sup>1</sup> Paolo Rizzi, Enzo di Martino, *Storia della Biennale 1895-1982*, Milano, Electa, 1982, p. 37.

World War I period. He also acted as the most effective mediator between local priorities and the demands of the state, guaranteeing that, to the greatest possible extent, Venice undertook the steps of industrial development with the backing of the regime.

In this way, the Venetian landscape of cultural entertainment was the product of an ambitious programme of economic reform moulded by the city's traditional tourist interests rather than an ideologically driven creation imposed through the directives of the central government.

### 3.1 Giuseppe Volpi and the cultural industrialization of Venice

Giuseppe Volpi, Count of Misurata,<sup>2</sup> was to become one of the most celebrated Italians during the inter-war period. Volpi was already well-known as the *conte venezianissimo*,<sup>3</sup> and had built a reputation as a master of finances as he gathered together an enormous business empire. By 1921, he held posts in at least 46 industrial groups such as the electrical giant, *Società Adriatica di Elettricità* (SADE), the Ciga hotel conglomerate, and the numerous insurance and banking corporations including Galileo and Lloyd Adriatico, the Banca Commerciale Italiana (a major shareholder in both SADE and the Ciga) and the Credito Industriale financial group.<sup>4</sup>

Through his position in the SADE, Volpi was the primary provider of electricity in the Veneto region together with Vittorio Cini and Achille Gaggia (the three formed the so-called 'Venetian group').<sup>5</sup> A steamship company and crucial

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<sup>2</sup> Volpi had been made count of Misurata, a stronghold conquered during the Libyan War of 1912, in December 1920 for his service as a diplomat.

<sup>3</sup> Pier Mario Pasinetti, 'Il convégno di poesia a Venezia', *Il Ventuno*, 7 August 1932.

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Di Stefano, Giannantonio Paladini, *Storia di Venezia 1797-1997. Dalla Monarchia alla Repubblica*, vol. III, Venezia, Supernova, 1997, p. 93

<sup>5</sup> In 1905, Cini started as a businessman in the field of transports and constructions. In 1925, he held posts in several societies: SADE, Credito Industriale, Società di Navigazione Interna and Società di Navigazione Libera Triestina (transports), Officine Meccaniche Italiane di Reggio Emilia (mechanics), Alti Forni e Acciaierie della Venezia-Giulia (steel industry), etc. (Maurizio Reberschak, 'Gli uomini capitali: il "gruppo veneziano" (Volpi, Cini e gli altri)', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, vol. III, p. 1272). Gaggia became part of the Venetian group in 1905 when he was appointed General Director at the SADE. In 1931, he held posts in 61 companies (mechanics, constructions and transports) and was president of the Ciga from 1925 to 1944 and from 1948 to 1953 (Ibid, p. 1278). Volpi, Cini and Gaggia were the new elements of the local economic life, embodying a second generation of Venetian entrepreneurs after the Papadopoli, Treves de' Bonfilii and Breda. (Di Stefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 36).



interests in the luxury hotels under construction on the Lido extended his areas of influence, ensuring that both tourist and transport were in place in the portfolio.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the auspicious encounter in 1900 between Volpi and Giuseppe Toeplitz, head of the Banca Commerciale had led to the development of a series of financial enterprises in a city which was moving towards the reinvention of itself as a commercial and industrial powerhouse.<sup>7</sup>

At the turn of the century, the Veneto region ranked as the third most important industrial district in Italy (after Piedmont and Lombardy), specialising in textile production and engineering. Venice's industrial base rested, to a large extent, on foreign investment, and major enterprises and industrial plants bore such names as Neville (mechanics), Stucky (Giancarlo was both the founder of *Pilla Pilla* which produced electrical material and administrator at *Credito Industriale*), Junghans (transports), Layet and Rothschild (gas companies). These foreign businessmen brought economic innovation to the lagoon, as the region witnessed the development of new power stations, ferry boat lines, and other successful commercial activities.<sup>8</sup>

Along with economic expansion, the city authorities began to consider ways of circumventing Venice's geographical limitations, developing the concept of 'exiting the island',<sup>9</sup> and building an 'industrial Venice' on the mainland, an idea increasingly favoured by the Venetian business elite.<sup>10</sup> The project of general economic restructuring of the district would also foster the implementation of a novel urban plan that had been devised in 1902 by Captain Luciano Petit, a technician supported above all by Piero Foscari. Foscari, a Venetian notable descendant of the Doge Alvise Foscari, member of the town council from 1899 to 1919 and subscriber of SADE shares, subsequently singled out Volpi as the man capable of transforming the plans for Porto Marghera into reality.<sup>11</sup> According to

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<sup>6</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 233.

<sup>7</sup> Reberschak, 'Gli uomini capitali', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1257.

<sup>8</sup> Di Stefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 33-4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> The solution was faithful to the ancient republican laws of 1292 which had established by decree the shift of the glass production to the Murano island in order to contain dangers of fire in Venice (Ibid, p. 104).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

historian Giovanni Fontana, Petit's plan came to occupy an important place in the processes of economic growth and the challenge of productive reorganisation faced by the Veneto region in the chemical, steel and mechanical fields after the First World War.<sup>12</sup>

Petit based the new plan for industrial takeoff in Marghera on the idea that 'rich' trades and traditional crafts would remain in Venice while 'poor' trades (fertilizers, coal, phosphates), mass production and manufacturing industries would move to the mainland. This economic 'Grand Strategy' entailed the construction of an industrial harbour, Porto Marghera, at the edge of the lagoon, linked by a bridge to the tourist port, Piazza San Marco, and the subsequent transfer of the less wealthy elements of the Venetian population to the industrial suburbs of Mestre, a strategic decision related to pressing demographic concerns in Venice (there were far too many inhabitants in the Venetian islets, about 150,000).<sup>13</sup> The islands of Lido, S. Erasmo, Murano and Giudecca were no longer capable of meeting the demographic challenges confronting Venice and needed to address the problem of overpopulation. It was hoped that improved conditions for both industry and housing would help relieve overcrowding and unsanitary conditions in the *centro storico*. According to Foscari and Petit, the project could not only be allied to Venice's land reclamation plans, it would make Venice an industrial centre of international standing. The Porto Marghera construction proposal would also entail a series of employment-creating public works schemes such as the building of railways, canals, power stations, bridges and garages.<sup>14</sup>

Politically, local debate polarized around the issue of whether manufacturing activities should continue to be located in Venice (as was argued by the 'conservatives') or whether the development of the Porto Marghera 'Grand Strategy' should be allowed to proceed as the big industrial and financial interests desired (as was argued by the 'modernizers').<sup>15</sup> Amongst the former, were members of the Chamber of Commerce and the small commercial elites who feared that

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<sup>12</sup> Giovanni Luigi Fontana, 'L'economia', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, vol. III, p. 1454.

<sup>13</sup> Di Stefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Fincardi, 'I fasti della 'tradizione'', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1489.

<sup>15</sup> Fontana, 'L'economia', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1448.

building a port outside Venice could cause a steady decline of commercial activities in the historic centre. The second faction comprised the local industrial and financial groups who saw in Porto Marghera a chance of great economic expansion and were given voice by Gino Damerini in *La Gazzetta di Venezia*.<sup>16</sup>

Complicating the issue somewhat were those concerned citizens who worried about the nature of the transformation of Venice that the project might bring, particularly the dangers of upsetting the environmental and economic balances in the lagoon. This party counted authorities such as Pompeo Molmenti (the liberal conservative town councillor from 1896 and then deputy and senator) and later Giovanni Giuriati and Carlo Suppiej (both of the Venetian PNF), among its supporters. From the 1920s, Giuriati and Suppiej propounded a dissenting form of *Fascismo d'ordine* and spoke against the 'tourist and industrial interests embodied by Volpi'.<sup>17</sup> Whereas Volpi and Foscari had defended Porto Marghera as the 'saviour' of the historic town, Giuriati and Suppiej argued that the upcoming wave of industrialization would seriously damage Venice's artistic heritage and the environmental balance in the lagoon. Eventually, the Venetian PNF lost out in favour of the local ruling class, now backed by the Fascist government.<sup>18</sup>

In February 1917, Volpi founded the *Sindacato di studi per imprese elettromatallurgiche e navali nel porto di Venezia* whose membership comprised names such as Cini, Gaggia, Stucky, Papadopoli and Breda. Meanwhile, the mayor Filippo Grimani,<sup>19</sup> and the town council started negotiations with the central government to develop Marghera. Thereafter, construction 'was handled at both regional and national levels with panache and speed over a matter of months'<sup>20</sup> after a formal agreement (dubbed a 'Volpian masterpiece' because of the complex negotiations and agreements involved) had been signed between the state represented by Paolo Boselli and Ivanoe Bonomi, the *Comune di Venezia* headed by Grimani, and the *Società Porto Industriale di Venezia* led by Volpi.<sup>21</sup> Construction finally began in

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<sup>16</sup> Fincardi, 'Gli 'Anni Ruggenti' dell'antico leone', p. 455.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Di Stefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 104.

<sup>19</sup> Grimani, who had been skeptical about Porto Marghera around 1904, gradually changed his mind in favour of the project (Ibid, p. 26).

<sup>20</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 276.

<sup>21</sup> Di Stefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 91

1919 where upon Piero Foscari issued a pamphlet on the matter and sent it to all members of the government. It claimed that the port 'would remove heavy industry from the historic city and, at the same time, further develop the hydroelectric production'.<sup>22</sup>

As suggested above, the mastermind behind the Porto Marghera scheme was Volpi himself. He was by no means a disinterested party and, as the head of the *Società Adriatica di Elettricità*, would be the main provider of the electrical power supplies necessary for the fulfilment of the project: In fact, the company played a central role in the birth of Porto Marghera, and acted as a major partner in its cartel.<sup>23</sup> The construction of an industrial port also represented a strategic economic objective for Volpi as it would allow for a significant reduction of production costs and the development of his role of supplier of services for harbours, railways, tourism, banking and navigation.<sup>24</sup>

The 'Venetian group' of Volpi, Cini,<sup>25</sup> Gaggia and other leading businessmen began to invest large amounts of capital in the development of the project which was established as the new economic hope of the old city, when in 1922, the first major industrial plants moved out to Marghera.<sup>26</sup> In the convention of 18 August 1926 (signed by Volpi in his role as Minister of Finance), favourable concessions were granted to the *Società Porto Industriale di Venezia*, relieving the company of the burden of various fees, taxes and the *Imposta di Ricchezza Mobile, terreni e fabbricati*.<sup>27</sup> The same year, the concept of a *Greater Venice* brought the mainland municipalities within its jurisdiction.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, no one could ignore the economic implications for the historic centre. With the manufacturing industries moving out to the mainland, the historic town, deprived of many of its economic

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<sup>22</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 276.

<sup>23</sup> Fontana, 'L'economia', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 14545

<sup>24</sup> Sergio Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi. Industria e Finanza tra Giolitti e Mussolini*, Venezia, Marsilio, 1997, p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> Vittorio Cini's businesses were usually financed by the Banca Commerciale Italiana where Volpi retained major interests (Reberschak, 'Gli uomini capitali', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1272-73).

<sup>26</sup> Guido Zucconi (ed.), *La Grande Venezia. Una Metropoli Incompiuta tra Otto e Novecento*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2002, p. 21. Between 1925 and 1939, industrial activities based in Porto Marghera overtook the commercial ones located in Venice (Ibid).

<sup>27</sup> Fontana, 'L'economia', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1455.

<sup>28</sup> Zucconi (ed.), *La Grande Venezia*, p. 20.

staples, was left with only one alternative; to promote its history, art and culture and to accept that its economic future lay in the business of tourism.

According to Bosworth, Volpi strongly desired the growth of Porto Marghera, 'that planned industrial development, which, in some eyes, promised to save Venice from a terminal decline or a tourist fate worse than death, and, in others, would lead to irredeemable pollution'.<sup>29</sup> He hoped that before long, the region would have become a seat of economic enterprise and a vibrant industrial district.<sup>30</sup>

Margaret Plant argued that 'with the establishment of Marghera and Greater Venice, linked by bridges, the city of Venice appeared, at least to its leaders, vigorous and renewed, an Italian partner in modern Fascism'.<sup>31</sup> In 1928, the Podestà Orsi praised Volpi's efforts towards the reorganisation of the area, conveniently forgetting that the Count had earlier been heavily criticised by the Fascists of Giuriati.<sup>32</sup>

'You do not have to fear that the necessities of industrial life might disrupt the artistic atmosphere of our city because Venice has finally solved its awkward problems. Today she retains, as any other large town, an intense industrial activity which has been transferred onto the mainland, at the borders of the lagoon, assuring the salvation of the ancient city. The man who has most contributed to the resolution of the matter is Count Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata to whom I bestow my gratitude'.<sup>33</sup>

Not only did Volpi represent the major capitalist interests of the lagoon area, he also embodied the two faces of the Venetian economy: the industrial and the tourist. The *Società Adriatica di Eletticità* was to Porto Marghera as the *Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi* was to the historic town, and both businesses, of course, were managed by Volpi.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, according to the 'Grand

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<sup>29</sup> Bosworth, *Italy and the Wider World*, p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> Reberschak, 'Gli uomini capitali', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1264.

<sup>31</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 285.

<sup>32</sup> Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, p. 83.

<sup>33</sup> Orsi, 'Discorso in occasione dell'inaugurazione della XVI Biennale Internazionale d'Arte', *Ateneo Veneto*, August 1928.

<sup>34</sup> Antonio Sartorello, *Funzione e Collocazione degli Istituti Espositivi d'Arte: Origini e Sviluppo della Biennale di Venezia (1895-1968)*, tesi di laurea 1977, Libera Università degli Studi di Trento, p. 90.

Strategy', the Venetian district was to be thought of as divided into two main areas: one, Porto Marghera, devoted to the new industries, the other, the historic town, which, deprived of its industrial economy would develop its ordained role as an international centre of cultural tourism, largely through the reinvigoration of its main cultural event, the Biennale of International Arts.<sup>35</sup> Any major revival of tourism in Venice would naturally benefit Volpi's hotel companies. Moreover, as the *Banca Commerciale* was connected to the British travel agency, Thomas Cook, it was no coincidence that tourism registered high up on Volpi's list of business priorities.<sup>36</sup> Fontana argued that his work for the Biennale Cinema Festival and his contributions to the restoration of several Venetian palaces (such as the *Conservatorio Benedetto Marcello*) were all undertaken within this commercial grand design.<sup>37</sup>

Volpi, therefore, seized for himself a lead role in the program of 'cultural industrialisation' that came to occupy a place of such importance in the economic strategy of the region in the inter-war period. In a speech delivered at Zurich University in January 1939, Volpi emphasized the 'two Venices', one 'ancient, historic, immortal, which must forever keep its sacred monuments inviolate to be a museum alive with splendour', and the other as exemplified at Marghera, 'a busy hive of factories harnessing Fascist energy to the benefit of production and trade'.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the territorial division was conceived of as existing along economically and culturally determined class lines: the Venetian island complete with the Biennale and its cultural prestige on the one hand; the hinterland with its industrial activities and working-class suburbs on the other. As productive activities shifted to the mainland, Venice became more and more a 'cultural habitat', the site of a tourist-fuelled cultural consumerism.<sup>39</sup> The idea of the *Grande Venezia* had created a compartmentalised system which effectively separated the urban nucleus from the metropolitan entity to which it remained functionally linked.<sup>40</sup> In this way, it is fair to say that a 'division of labour' had imposed itself upon the transformation

<sup>35</sup> Di Stefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 102.

<sup>36</sup> Bosworth, 'Tourist planning in Fascist Italy', p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Fontana, 'L'economia', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1466.

<sup>38</sup> Giuseppe Volpi, *Venezia antica e moderna*, Venezia, 1939, pp. 29-30.

<sup>39</sup> Sartorello, *Funzione e Collocazione degli Istituti Espositivi d'Arte*, p. 88.

→ As cited in Bosworth, *Venice 1911-45*, p. 22 :

of the area, a phenomenon which surely contributed to the effective exploitation of cultural activities in historic Venice.

~~Despite having many interests outside Venice, the construction of Porto Marghera remained Volpi's primary focus~~<sup>41</sup> Once the industrial port was established, Volpi planned to create 'an intellectual Venice with a tourist future'.<sup>42</sup> For Fincardi, the project was clearly designed to benefit Volpi's tourist-industrial investments in the Venetian district.<sup>43</sup> He sought to make real the myth of an ideal space of entertainment and cultural events suitable for a new aristocratic-bourgeois tourist audience. Volpi's managerial and business expertise gave him an awareness of Venice's potential as a commercially successful cultural resort and the changes that would be required for its transformation. Therefore, the development of cultural tourism in the 1930s with the creation of additional Biennale festivals, major art events such as the Tintoretto, Titian and Veronese exhibitions, and a string of other public celebrations (see chapter 2) came to fit the broader plan for the economic restructuring of the Venetian district. The 'Volpi era' prioritised the foundation of a commercial tourist infrastructure in Venice with the Biennale at its centre. Without the Biennale, Venice's artistic, historic and maritime heritage would be seen to be diminished, and the cultural tourism industry would have lost much of its *raison d'être*.

### 3.2 The vision of a new industrial Venice

At the beginning of the century, Venice was widely considered to have been a non-productive spot of luxury and hedonism.<sup>44</sup> In particular, the city's constructed identity corresponded with the image of a decadent resort that lived upon gambling, *soirées dansantes*, masquerades and idle leisure. As Bosworth has suggested:

'For the tourists who crowded into Piazza San Marco, by contrast, Venice had many charms. It was a fabulous place –Dickens comprehended it in a 'dream'; Ruskin proclaimed the Doge's Palace 'the central building of the world'; years after, Théophile Gautier could

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<sup>40</sup> Zucconi (ed.), *La Grande Venezia*, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, p. 79.

<sup>42</sup> Di Stefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 112.

<sup>43</sup> Fincardi, 'I fasti della 'tradizione'', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1489.

still see in his mind's eye the colour of the peaches which he had bought on the Frezzeria. But to the Victorian and *fin de siècle* mind, such sensual beauty and pleasure carried a strong hint of sin. In the writing of figures as diverse as 'Baron Corvo', Maurice Barrès or Thomas Mann, Venice became the special symbol of decadence, lust, adultery and homosexuality, this last still at the time that unnamed sexual perversion which thrilled so many northern Europeans with its possibilities'.<sup>45</sup>

The decadent image attached to the city had been established long before the advent of Fascism. As early as 1910, members of the Futurist movement, which included Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, had launched some 800,000 leaflets from the Clock Tower in St. Mark's Square, directly upon tourists returning from the Lido. Containing embittered rhetoric, the leaflets attacked the aura of decadence that Venice had nourished for centuries.<sup>46</sup>

'We repudiate Ancient Venice, exhausted and ravaged by centuries of pleasures, the Venice that we have loved and possessed in a great nostalgic dream. We repudiate the Venice of the foreigners, market of antiquarian fakers, magnet of universal snobbishness and stupidity, bed worn out by her procession of lovers, jewelled hip-bath of cosmopolitan courtesans, great sewer of traditionalism.

We want to heal this rotting city, magnificent sore of the past. We want to give new life and nobility to the Venetian people, fallen from their ancient grandeur, drugged by a nauseating cowardice and abused by the habit of dirty little business deals.

We want to prepare the birth of an industrial and military Venice able to dominate the Adriatic, that great Italian lake. Let us fill the stinking little canals with the rubble of the tottering, infected old palaces. Let us burn the gondolas, rocking chairs for idiots, raise to the sky the majestic geometry of metal bridges and factories, abolishing the drooping curves of ancient buildings. Let the reign of divine Electric Light come at last, to free Venice from her venal hotel-room moonlight'.<sup>47</sup>

According to Marinetti, Venice was the symbol of 'pastism', and it was

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<sup>44</sup> Bosworth, *Italy and the Wider World*, pp. 170-71.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 170.

<sup>46</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 261-62.

<sup>47</sup> As cited in Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 262: F.T. Marinetti, U. Boccioni, C. Carrà, L. Russolo, 'Contro Venezia passatista', in Maria Drudi Gambillo, Teresa Fiori, *Archivi del Futurismo*, Roma, De Luca, 1957, pp. 19-20. English trans. In *Futurismo e Futurismi*, Milano, Bompiani, 1986.



necessary to 'turn one's shoulders on the past in order to welcome the future'.<sup>48</sup>

At the same time, these demands for modernisation revealed a lack of knowledge of the work of Piero Foscari, Achille Gaggia and Giuseppe Volpi, whose Sade company had at the heart of numerous projects including the development of hydroelectricity in the Veneto.<sup>49</sup> For Plant, 'Marinetti's critique might appear highly original and the first substantial attack on *passeisme*, but filling in the canals and the lagoon, boarding over the Grand Canal, providing carriageways, developing industry, opening up the Adriatic to Italian concerns and re-energising the city in general, had all been mooted and discussed during the two previous decades'.<sup>50</sup>

However, during the First World War such thoughts were discarded. Situated close to the front line, the Venetian islets were subject to enemy aerial bombardment and, after the rout of Caporetto, had the majority of their civilian population evacuated.<sup>51</sup> In 1922, with Fascism in firm control of the state, it was time for Venice to recreate its image in tune with the Fascist conception of the productive Italian nation. Fascism could not tolerate an unhealthy reputation and aimed at transforming the city into a diligent and dynamic town seeking to substitute a disheveled Venice for a disciplined one. The local ruling class, too, expressed its desire for the city to 'walk on its own, with its own courage, forgetting the alleged credit towards the state'.<sup>52</sup>

In this light, the new industrial suburb of Marghera, not only came to represent tangible economic possibilities for the Venetian population, it was also key in the construction of the identity of a re-born, fruitful town, along with the local and central governments' wishes. On one hand, the municipality pursued the revitalization of traditional local activities (see chapter 4, part three), on the other, it aimed at rescuing Venice's representation of a tired borough by creating a modern industrial reality just off the lagoon. Only in this way could Venice be a true Fascist city. Therefore, post-war Venice came to be associated with Porto Marghera, which

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<sup>48</sup> 'Una vivace intervista con F. T. Marinetti', *Il Giornale del Veneto*, 27 April 1926.

<sup>49</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 262.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 264.

<sup>51</sup> Bosworth, *Italy and the Wider World*, p.171.

<sup>52</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute del Consiglio Comunale di Venezia, session 2 March 1922.

in turn was linked with the drive towards modernization promoted by Fascism.

The municipality made every possible effort to reinforce the bond between a resurrected Venice and Fascism, the political force which had enabled the transformation. The regime had marked a watershed between a dark period of pre-World War I and the future might of industrial Venice. In so doing, Fascist Venice was overshadowing liberal Venice. In 1928, the Podestà Orsi took the opportunity of welcoming the press to the XVI Biennale to reveal the city's positive achievements under Fascist rule:

'You have visited every inch of the great Padania Plain, characterised by industrial activity, and you have come to Venice, generally labelled the city of arts and history; but tomorrow you will see the new industrial port in Marghera and have the chance to verify important factors. First of all, Venice has finally solved the question of having an intense industrial life without jeopardising the safety of the historic centre, by shifting all the equipment outside the lagoon. Secondly, Venice, always considered as an inert and sleepy town, partakes instead with energy in the magnificent awakening which, under the impulse of those men guiding the nation with Roman grandeur, shakes today the whole Italy (...). Tell the people that amidst monuments of ancient sensibility there is a population who works in an atmosphere fuelled with enthusiasm and faith, with a clear vision of its destiny. The salute I am paying is the one of the old and new Venice'.<sup>53</sup>

Contemporary journalistic sources suggest that it was vital for the Venetian elites to ensure that local plans for industrial takeoff were inscribed within a wider, Fascist-inspired, spiritual and material process of renewal. On several other occasions, Venice had incorporated the Fascist 'ethic' in its effort to obtain central government recognition and support for its programme of reconstruction.<sup>54</sup> For example, Podestà Alverà, in the early 1930s, welcomed the introduction of rigid economic controls, with a reaffirmation of the city's unconditional faith in the Fascist Revolution:

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<sup>53</sup> 'La giornata dei giornalisti esteri', *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 23 June 1928.

<sup>54</sup> See for instance AMV, Alverà, *L'Amministrazione del Comune di Venezia*, where the Podestà labelled the Lictor Bridge over the lagoon as 'the symbol of Fascist geniality and courage'; AMV, *Verbalì delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia*, session 28 March 1937, where Alverà declared that 'Venice had been for centuries the heir and the best guardian of the spirit of willpower handed down by Rome, and [could] be, thanks to Fascism, worth of the present march towards the future'.

‘Venice shall be among the first cities to partake to the economic rebirth that the Duce has foreseen. This will be stimulated by the grand works ordered by the Head of the government which should necessarily convey new vivifying lymphs to her never ending activities (...). We, representing different interests and trades, joined by the same faith that is the Fascist faith, tied by the same sentiment of devotion, by the same love for this immortal city, we demand of the Fascist officials and the Blackshirts that we join the Duce and the Fascist Revolution’.<sup>55</sup>

Town authorities had often complained about how people visited Venice simply for leisure and not for business. Isolated from the mainland, the town was cut off from the Veneto’s general commercial traffic. Hence, Mussolini made pronouncements in favour of the enlargement of the railway bridge over the lagoon, to provide access for road traffic, a project finally completed in the early 1930s. Another seriously considered plan was the development of airborne communications, so as to make Venice the centre of Italian air traffic.<sup>56</sup>

Within this framework, the construction of Porto Marghera and the Littorio Bridge (the enlarged railway bridge) symbolised progress towards the Fascist conception of modern Venice. In those years, Gino Damerini wrote in the *Rivista di Venezia* of how the bridge could accomplish ‘a psychological task: that of destroying the myth of a ‘flabby’ Venice which live[d] in memories and luxury hotels, an unfair myth now overshadowed by an exemplary productive reality that, in number and importance of creations, has no comparison in any other Italian city’.<sup>57</sup> According to Damerini, this fresh role was acquired thanks to the dynamism of the regime and the new Italy. The bridge linking Venice to the continent was a sign of the transformation occurring within ‘the totalitarian organism of the native land’.<sup>58</sup>

In 1932, as the economic recession plumbed new depths across Europe, the

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<sup>55</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 11 October 1930.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, session 26 July 1928.

<sup>57</sup> Gino Damerini, ‘Il Ponte del Littorio. Salvaguardia dell’antica città e della nuova Venezia’, *La Rivista di Venezia*, April 1933. According to Fincardi the bridge had been ‘blessed by Patriarch La Fontaine and inaugurated by Prince Umberto’ at the presence of several ministers and Venetian notables (Fincardi, ‘I fasti della ‘tradizione’’, in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1489).

<sup>58</sup> Damerini, ‘Il Ponte del Littorio’.

national daily *Il Corriere della Sera* declared that the best way to enjoy the new essence of Venice, created by ten years of uninterrupted Fascist rule, was to admire the landscape from the highest point of the city, the Clock Tower in St. Mark's Square. It recited:

'The splendid spectacle of powerful and active modernity infiltrates deep into the soul of the old city. The grandiose complex of works undertaken to link the island to the mainland represents better than anything else the spirit of force and decision with which Fascist Italy has approached the resolution of Venice's long-time troubles. Three issues have been solved at the same time: 1) the enlargement of the port and its commercial traffic; 2) the demographic and housing expansion; 3) the conservation of the traditional aspect of the historic centre. The solution of the ancient 'question of the bridge' has been accomplished not only from the theoretical point of view but also as a living reality thanks to the Duce's will. Today, fifteen years after the stipulation of the convention between the state, the municipality and the Società del Porto Industriale for the construction of the port itself, it is a powerful creation. In 1927, with 'Fascist decision', there was the providential fusion of Venice and Mestre into a unique commune which profoundly penetrates into the mainland. This surely represents a pure act of Fascist will. Porto Marghera has reached its post of second port in Italy, according to the weight of goods charged and discharged. Above all, the Venice-Padua highway is the completion of a vast and complex system of communications which has, in ten years, multiplied the importance of Venice as a centrefold of wide streams of commercial and tourist traffic. This naturally implies the constant care of the entire tourist and hotel equipment that has been fully developed in Venice, especially at the Lido, nowadays a model European beach resort. In history and real life there are two contrasting aspects of Venice. There is a Venice of poetry and art, the one called 'city of dreams', and there is a Venice of willpower and work which can fight hard to preserve its position in the world, a Venice which has learned a great practical lesson. Mussolini's Italy has finally recalled the Venice of the imperial tradition to real life without blurring the enchantment of the dream city'.<sup>59</sup>

Foreign reporters, too, were soon highlighting the great changes that had taken place in Venice during the period of Fascist rule.<sup>60</sup> Occasionally, the local press bemoaned the 'useless' expenses allowed by the *Consulta Municipale* in

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<sup>59</sup> Zorzi, 'Il grandioso impulso del Fascismo a Venezia. Problemi di secoli risolti in due lustri', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 15 October 1932.

<sup>60</sup> See for instance, Richard Fletcher, 'Venezia: dieci anni dopo. Vista da un giornalista inglese', *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 17 July 1937.

order to improve the city's appearance. Usually, the authorities quickly responded by claiming they had done their best to avoid those disbursements while directing municipal care to the needy, thereby ensuring that resources were distributed equally among local citizens, so as to reinforce the image of a community 'that lived upon honest work' rather than gambling.<sup>61</sup>

To conclude, Porto Marghera represented much more than a concentration of industrial plants, it stood as a fresh Fascist start after the liberal era had witnessed the decline of Venice's traditional trades. The new Venice therefore embodied a 'true' Fascist municipality which had been rescued by the regime. In this light, the relationship between the city and the central government could be founded upon a positive new basis, with Fascism not just a normative authority, but also a force for the economic rehabilitation of Venice.

### 3.3 Volpi and Fascism

According to Bosworth, rather than being a Fascist 'new man',<sup>62</sup> 'Volpi rose in the Giolittian era through deals certainly with the *Banca Commerciale* and probably with the royal family. He made a name for himself as a man with good contacts in the Balkans and Asia Minor and, in 1912, was therefore selected by Giolitti to ease the negotiating processes of the Treaty of Ouchy which ended the Libyan War'.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, by 1921, he had attained sufficient status for the occasion of his departure to assume the governorship of Tripolitania to merit considerable public acclaim.<sup>64</sup>

Nonetheless, the fact that Volpi rose to prominence in the liberal era was no impediment to the continuation of a successful career under Fascism. Mussolini on various occasions expressed his admiration for Volpi: 'No Venetian can ignore what the name 'Volpi' means for Venice'. It stood, the Duce explained, for 'beauty and poetry, as well as will and conquest'. Armed with such high praise, the count could indeed portray himself as the new Doge.<sup>65</sup> Yet, according to Sergio Romano,

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<sup>61</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 18 May 1938.

<sup>62</sup> Bosworth, 'Venice, 1911-45', p. 11.

<sup>63</sup> Ibidem, *Italy and the Wider World*, p. 87.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem, 'Venice, 1911-45', p. 11.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid (as cited in), p. 16.

up to 1920, he was still a 'Giolittian' and was attacked by Piero Marsich and the first wave of Venetian urban Fascism (Marsich was vehemently opposed to Volpi's domination of the Venetian economy).<sup>66</sup>

In March 1919, the first *Fasci di Combattimento*<sup>67</sup> were created in Milan, Verona, Treviso and Padua, followed by those of Venice, Trieste, Mestre and Feltre, and before long, much of the country was troubled by the violence of the Fascist squads.<sup>68</sup> The National Fascist Party (PNF) was created by Benito Mussolini on 7 November 1921. Venice, like other Italian cities, was experiencing the return of ex-soldiers from the front and undergoing the social unrest of the so-called 'Red Biennium', the leftist popular turmoil of 1919-1921 influenced by the Russian Revolution.<sup>69</sup>

In Venice, it was the 'urban' Fascism of Piero Marsich which gradually gathered consensus amongst ex-veterans and students. In contrast to the 'agrarian' Fascism that began to dominate the national movement, Marsich's Fascism remained faithful to 'anti-bourgeois, anti-clerical, anti-socialist and anti-parliamentary values that had hitherto characterised the Milanese *Fasci*'. He despised both the agrarian Fascists arming against Socialist organisations and Volpi's aspirations for economic hegemony expressed in Venice through his control of the SADE.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, Marsich believed that Volpi's involvement in negotiating the Treaty of Rapallo between Italy and Yugoslavia (12 November 1920) which ended the Fiume affair, had betrayed Italian nationalism.<sup>71</sup>

In order to stop Marsich attacking the SADE, Volpi in the early 1920s started supporting the Venetian Fascists Giovanni Giuriati<sup>72</sup> and Alberto De Stefani,<sup>73</sup> later ministers under Mussolini. While Marsich was supported by ex-soldiers, students and radical groups, Giuseppe Volpi was able to draw upon a

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<sup>66</sup> Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, pp. 121-22.

<sup>67</sup> Political organisations gathering ex-combatants and war veterans.

<sup>68</sup> Di Stefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 75.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, p. 122

<sup>72</sup> He had been head of the temporary government set up by Gabriele D'Annunzio in Fiume in 1919 (Di Stefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 77).

<sup>73</sup> He was born in Verona and took his *laurea* in Padua. In 1921, he was elected deputy and took part in the March of Rome in 1922 (Ibid, p. 78).

reservoir of consensus from among the upper-middle classes. By 1922, Volpi's version of *Fascismo d'ordine* had asserted its primacy over the 'anarchic' form associated with Marsich,<sup>74</sup> and his ambitious economic plans for the development of an industrial harbour on the mainland had been generally well received by the local town council.<sup>75</sup>

In strictly political terms, the first sign of the 'impending defeat of local democratic forces' had occurred at the administrative elections of October 1920, won by the *Lista per il rinnovamento cittadino*, including Liberals, Fascists, Nationalists and *Popolari* sustained by Patriarch La Fontaine. The new majority appointed a municipal council headed by Davide Giordano, a Venetian doctor and a Fascist who replaced the liberal-conservative Filippo Grimani.<sup>76</sup>

The fact that the Fascist radicals were largely excluded from this series of appointments indicates the success of their moderate counterparts in seeking to consolidate their image as an appropriate and acceptable form of political expression for the professional and upper-middle classes. Giordano's promotion opened the way for an alliance between the conservatives and Mussolini.<sup>77</sup> In October 1922, with the March on Rome, Fascism took control of the government and from that moment onwards, the *Fascismo d'ordine* was at the head of Venice, shattering the hopes and expectations of anarchists and democrats (Marsich resigned from the PNF in 1922).<sup>78</sup>

With Fascism in power, Volpi came to embody the classic example of a flanker joining the regime rather than embodying its ideology, with the main aim of protecting his own interests. According to Romano, 'The *Fascio* [was] a municipal and national force that Volpi, perhaps cynically, and certainly realistically, had to take into account since it represented many interests in the city – including the

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Christian Bec, *Venezia. La Storia, il Mito*, Roma, Carocci, 2003, p. 115.

<sup>76</sup> Di Stefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 79.

<sup>77</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 277.

<sup>78</sup> Di Stefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 80. After becoming a fully-established regime in 1925, Fascism issued new laws concerning local administrations: the liberal mayor became the Fascist Podestà appointed by the government and aided by a *Consulta Municipale* (a municipal council nominated by the state). The last elected mayor was Davide Giordano (1920-24), followed by Bruno Fornaciari, a temporary commissary until 1926, after which the first Podestà, Pietro Orsi, was appointed, serving from 1926-29 (Ibid, p. 83).

urban petty bourgeoisie and part of the working class at the port such as the dockers, needed by Volpi to realize his project'.<sup>79</sup>

Volpi formally joined the PNF (National Fascist Party) in 1924 and acted as Minister of Finance from July 1925 to July 1928. The 'Battle of the Lira' (deflationary policies designed to produce lower salaries and increased productivity) unsurprisingly served the interests of big capital and industry such as Volpi's own SADE which, between 1925 and 1928, grew significantly stronger.<sup>80</sup> He also achieved other important goals such as a balanced national budget through severe checks on public and local expenditures and the payment of war debts and international loans.<sup>81</sup> In 1928, Mussolini heard that Volpi had privately made clear his opposition to the government's monetary policy and therefore discharged him.<sup>82</sup>

Volpi continued to remain loyal to Fascism in public, something that can certainly be explained at the local level by his need to acquire additional land around Marghera that had been reclaimed by the state. In a letter addressed to Giovanni Giuriati, Minister of Public Works, he wrote:

'In the aftermath of World War I a reconstruction fever was with us and Fascism, with its spirit of renewal, was there to help us by creating the necessary conditions for loyalty and labour; thereafter positive ideas just arrived (...). The mercantile future for Venice is Porto Marghera, it is also the greatest weapon for the defence of those beloved islets'.<sup>83</sup>

In his speeches, it was made clear the main aim of the 'Grand Strategy' was to separate industrial production from the historic city, in order to defend its artistic heritage. In more practical terms, the development of a commercial port on the one hand and a tourist infrastructure on the other, would serve the economic interests of both branches of his own business groups. Indeed, according to Romano, Porto Marghera constituted the basis for a huge fiscal evasion sanctioned by the state.<sup>84</sup> Volpi's declaration many years later to the Biennale committee meeting of 12 May

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<sup>79</sup> Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, p. 122.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, pp. 153-54.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 166.

<sup>83</sup> As cited in Di Stefano, Paladini, *Soria di Venezia*, p. 101.

<sup>84</sup> Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, pp. 89-92.



1941 is significant. He made this point:

‘You know well how my one and only goal was always that of reviving my native town. In the period of time between Caporetto and Vittorio Veneto I brought to life the project of Porto Marghera. At present, Marghera counts 107 industries, with a capital investment of about 4-5,000 million lire; it employs 20,000 workers, and given that for any worker there is a family of three, as a consequence Marghera benefits around 60,000 people (...)’.<sup>85</sup>

Such claims strongly suggest that Volpi’s outlook was regional rather than national. As Romano put it, Volpi always acted in favour of Venice, ‘for which he had shown love and devotion (*adorazione filiale*), and was able to embody at best its ‘provincial cosmopolitanism’’.<sup>86</sup>

By the 1930s, Volpi had established himself as a leading business figure in Venice. He was able to assume the credit for the successful creation of Marghera and the political influence that came with economic power allowed him access to the heart of the Fascist regime, access which he used to promote both the economic interests of the town and his own businesses.<sup>87</sup> Margaret Plant has remarked:

‘Hosting these cultural events from the centre of his hotel empire at the Lido, Volpi saw himself as an entrepreneurial twentieth-century doge heading the cultural renewal of Venice, as well as its post-war industrial might. And that might was indeed considerable while Marghera prospered in the late 1930s, providing Mussolini’s ever-expanding war effort with crucial industrial backing. Volpi’s development of the coking industry, Vetrocoke, has been described as the ‘backbone’ of industrial production in these years’.<sup>88</sup>

If the well-being of Venice and his own businesses represented his primary interest, Volpi knew how to relate national politics to local circumstances. Clearly he had found political support for his entrepreneurial aspirations in the Fascist regime, regardless of the depths of his ideological commitment. The regime, on the other hand, had found a man capable of bringing tourism, international acclaim and

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<sup>85</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato Amministrazione Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 12 May 1941.

<sup>86</sup> Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, p. 8.

<sup>87</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 295.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

industrial development to Venice (and by extension to the nation). This, in spite of the Fascists' early rhetoric about breaking free from the corrupt liberal ruling elites.

Significantly Romano makes the point that cultural tourism in Venice could be successfully expanded only if the city found a privileged niche within Fascism:

'The city [Venice], with its cultural individuality, granted him [Volpi] a certain degree of independence from Rome, whoever was at the head of the state, Mussolini or Giolitti. (...) He had understood that the city could be a primary intellectual centre only if the regime would grant it autonomy. Venice, capital of the cinema, of the theatre and figurative arts could not be just an Italian or Fascist town, it had to be a free area [*zona franca*]. Therefore, a mediating figure with Rome was needed. Volpi, who was, together with Cini and Caggia, the most prominent businessman and the boss in Venice, had this role'.<sup>89</sup>

Vittorio Cini, one of Volpi's closest collaborators and business partners, argued in 1959 that the count was never active in any political party but conceived of politics as public service rather than a profession. His aim was merely 'to serve Venice and his country, under any legitimate government, above any political belief or prejudice'.<sup>90</sup> This may strike some as being unduly reverential but it does make the point that Volpi clearly cared about Venice (and his Venetian business interests), before and above any ideological commitment to Fascism.

Thus, when Marla Stone argues that Volpi 'came from a new technocratic class rising to prominence under Fascism', she is missing a rather important point.<sup>91</sup> Volpi's peculiarity is that he represented the distinction between the original cells of urban Fascism and those Venetian elites who shifted from Liberalism to Fascism, living alongside it and taking advantage of it, but who could never to be said to have been totally in sympathy with the regime, creating ambiguities that would last until the end of the war.

Rather than being a 'true' Fascist, Volpi was more of a 'by-stander', dedicated to the Fascist regime rather than the Fascist movement, to employ a De

<sup>89</sup> Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, pp. 8-200.

<sup>90</sup> Vittorio Cini, 'Giuseppe Volpi: l'uomo', in Associazione degli Industriali nel quarantesimo anniversario di Porto Marghera e del Rotary Club di Venezia nel trentacinquesimo anniversario della sua fondazione (ed.), *Giuseppe Volpi, ricordi e testimonianze*, 1959, p. 17.

<sup>91</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 38.

→ As cited in Bosworth, 'Venice 1911-45', p. 21:

Felicean distinction.<sup>92</sup> Volpi remained 'a *fiancheggiatore* who had nothing to do with Fascism, a symbol of continuity with the Giolittian ruling class'.<sup>93</sup> His industrial background 'informed his attitude toward culture, which combined two conceptions, that of the Renaissance *merchant-condottiero* and the Victorian empire builder'.<sup>94</sup> For Bosworth, Volpi was

'A collector of innumerable offices, omnipresent in Venice's social and cultural activities and its most evident bearer of political, economic and social power. Volpi had become and would remain until 1943, the chief mediator between the structures of Venetian life and the 'event' of Fascism. In so doing he embodied living proof of the gap between Fascist theory and Fascism in practice'.<sup>95</sup>

Volpi was once reported to have announced: 'It is not my fault if my interests happen to meet those of the State'.<sup>96</sup> Put in other way, his dream of cultural tourism in Venice served, first and foremost, his own commercial and industrial advantages. This can be seen in his promotion of the 'Venetian experience'<sup>97</sup> of festivals, gondolas and luxurious hotels and in his artful combination of Venetian, Italian, and cosmopolitan identities. It is to be seriously doubted, therefore, whether he was ever primarily concerned with Fascism's proclaimed program of the 'nationalization of the masses'.

### 3.4 The case of the Biennale Music and Theatre festivals as cultural businesses

Volpi had long acted as a major patron of the arts. His power appeared unquestionable under Fascism: he had residences in London and Rome, and owned the great Palladian villa at Maser.<sup>98</sup> However, he had long been concerned with shaking off the stereotyped image of the modern Italian businessman who, though possessed of entrepreneurial skills and economic *savoir-faire*, was embarrassingly deficient in cultural awareness. According to Romano, by 1921, Volpi was already

<sup>92</sup> De Felice, *Le Interpretazioni del Fascismo*, Bari, Laterza, 1996, p. 167.

<sup>93</sup> Reberschak, 'Gli uomini capitali', in Isnenghi, Woolf (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1268.

<sup>94</sup> Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> Bosworth, 'Venice, 1911-45', p. 12.

<sup>96</sup> As cited in Di Stefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 114.

<sup>97</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 101.

<sup>98</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 305

known as a ‘city-builder’, a ‘discoverer of ancient treasures’, and as a ‘patron of the arts and sciences’.<sup>99</sup> On 9 September 1922, Bazzoni reported Volpi’s purchase of the acclaimed work ‘Madre e Bambino’ on behalf of the *Società Porto Industriale di Venezia*, a painting which was thereafter donated to the International Gallery of Modern Art in Venice.<sup>100</sup> In 1929, Volpi was chosen by the Patriarch of Venice as president of the body responsible for the maintenance of St. Mark’s Basilica, the most important town monument and a powerful symbol of Venice.<sup>101</sup> He was also in touch with the Venetian intellectual entourage centred around Caffè Florian in St. Mark’s Square (including Bordiga and Fradeletto who were later to serve as secretary-generals of the Biennale, Orsi, a future Podestà, and Tito, Selvatico and Ciardi, acclaimed local painters).

It was in 1930, however, that Volpi took the major step towards his objective of integrating the economic development of the city with its cultural status when the Venice Biennale was made by the state into an autonomous body, and Volpi himself was appointed President of the newly independent institution. Margaret Plant makes the point that Volpi was regarded, both by the Venetian municipality and the Fascist bureaucrats, as the man capable of successfully combining the cultural and commercial aspects of the Biennale:

‘Rather than implementing Fascism’s role for the Biennale, Volpi was able to identify the Biennale with particular Venetian interests, in line with the cultural pretensions of the regime, and assure its viability in a competitive national climate. That the Biennale was a prestigious political platform was more than evident during the official visits of Hitler and Mussolini in 1934, when Volpi was prominent as host’.<sup>102</sup>

By the same token, in 1930, the Podestà addressed a letter to the Prefect of Venice, claiming that Volpi was the individual most responsible for the ‘Venetian awakening in the industrial and maritime fields’.<sup>103</sup> Volpi was described as the

<sup>99</sup> Romano, *Giuseppe Volpi*, p. 196.

<sup>100</sup> AMV, Atti Presidiali, anni 1817-1947, ‘Esposizione Artistica Internazionale 1923’.

<sup>101</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Opera di ricostruzione della Basilica di San Marco’, trim. I, 1929, n. 1107.

<sup>102</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 295.

<sup>103</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, ‘Promemoria 1930’.

‘father’ of the gigantic ‘generator’ that was the industrial harbour of Marghera, focal point of land and maritime communications between the oriental markets and the commercial sites of central Europe. He was renowned as the man who had reconquered Tripolitania and acted as its governor, and was portrayed as a great statesman, businessman, and skilful negotiator in Lausanne, Washington and London. Unsurprisingly, given a background of this kind, the Podestà considered Volpi to be ‘the best person to lead and promote the development of the Biennale of International Arts, the most important artistic enterprise in the world’.<sup>104</sup> In 1936, Volpi organized conferences of ‘colonial culture’ at the Theatre *La Fenice*.<sup>105</sup> In 1938, the Count was made President of the Executive Committee of the First Convention for the Development of Industrial Autarky,<sup>106</sup> and by 1942, he was President of the Committee of Supervision of the town museums.<sup>107</sup>

Volpi’s role as a ‘cultural facilitator’ is illustrated by his declaration at the inauguration of the *Settecento* Museum at *Ca’ Rezzonico* in 1936. According to him, ‘the essence of the task confronting Venice [was] encapsulated in the construction of the ‘Littorio’ bridge (the longest in Italy and built in record time) and the opening of the museum at *Ca’ Rezzonico*’.<sup>108</sup> This suggests that for a businessman like Volpi, the cultivation of cultural tourism and its related institutions in Venice was directly proportional to the development of infrastructure and economic progress. Only in this way, there could be an actual prosperity for the city.

Volpi thus conceived of culture as being at the service of the economic development: its exploitation would herald a new era of commercially viable public events such as concerts, exhibitions, festivals and other celebrations. These cultural showcases represented an array of entertainments and bourgeois amusements offering potentially high returns on investments in the travel and tourist industries. The productive reorganization of the Venetian district sought by the Venetian

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Conferenze di cultura coloniale al teatro La Fenice’, trim. I, 1936, n. 312.

<sup>106</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 4, busta ‘Compagnie teatrali e cinematografiche, manifestazioni varie 1936-1938’.

<sup>107</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 8 July 1942.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, session 5 May 1936.

ruling class led them to expect that the art event would perform – now more than ever – a clear economic role, thereby rendering their speculation profitable.<sup>109</sup>

This is a quite different proposition from the interpretations placed upon cultural production under Fascism by several cultural historians which put the emphasis on culture as having been at the service of the state's programme of ideological indoctrination (for instance Gentile, see chapter 1). Though the following example applies to theatre performances, it is quite indicative of those historians' traditional view of the usage of culture made by Italian Fascism and European fascism in general:

'It appears to be a typical trait of fascist regimes that they sought to translate their political creeds into a theatrical language that drew heavily on the traditions of ritual and mysticism. Theatre as a symbolic expression of fascist ideology made use of performative conventions derived from religious and secular sources. Like all ritual theatre, it had the function of offering a healing power, or *katharsis*, in a moment of crisis – in this instance, a perceived national crisis – and to communicate a binding belief system to the participants. Theatre, because of its immediacy, touches a deeply irrational core that no other form of propaganda can reach. It conveys political messages in an overtly non-political form. In addition, it provides the participant with an experience of the self in communion with others, all of whom are potential subscribers to the presented belief system. Therefore, fascist theatre could fulfil the function of leading the spectator out of the everyday sphere and away from the realities of an alienated existence in societies undergoing major structural crises in the aftermath of the First World War, in order to bind the community in an emotionally elating experience that transcended class divisions, political divergencies, individualism, uprooted existence in a modern metropolis, and so on. Mobilising mass audiences and manipulating the emotional impact generated by the event for political purposes seems to be a common trait of fascist theatre in all countries'.<sup>110</sup>

If for Fascism, theatre and other artistic languages had the primary function of conveying Fascist values to audiences through cultural experiences, for the Venetian ruling class their primary function continued to be the enhancement of Venice's ability to attract great numbers of cultural consumers (significantly, no

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<sup>109</sup> Giuseppe Ghigi, 'l'olimpiade del Cinema sul bagnasciuga di Volpi', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932. Il Cinema diventa Arte*, Venezia, Fabbri Editori, 1982, p. 28.

<sup>110</sup> Berghaus, 'Introduction', in Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre*, pp. 4-5.

mass theatre productions were staged in Venice, unlike other Italian cities). This raised the interesting question of what might happen if and when the two positions clashed with each other.

The intersections of cultural politics with tourism can also be exposed through an analysis of the *Verbali del Comitato di Amministrazione Ente Biennale* - the minutes of the Biennale administrative board (several members of which also sat on the town council) that are held at the *Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee* in Venice. Although the *Verbali* only started in 1930, when the exhibition was turned into an autonomous institution directly dependent on the state, they do illustrate the extent to which the Committee's primary concern was commercial exploitation of the Biennale's cultural prestige.

Within the Biennale enterprise, the case of the Music and Theatre festivals provides an excellent example of the connection between national political directives and local, commercial priorities. It is not the aim here to dwell upon the cultural content of such events, nor to deny claims regarding their cultural value. However, this section does seek to establish that their primary role was inescapably linked to the idea of the Biennale as a *commercial* venture. Sources suggest that at the beginning of the 1930s the new events were seen as part of a strategy to defy the worst economic effects of the Great Depression and to regenerate tourism in the lagoon. In particular, they demonstrate the manner in which cultural events were geared towards the interests of commerce.

As mentioned above, Volpi, as head of the *Ente Autonomo Biennale*, founded the collateral festivals in the 1930s. In contrast to the art exhibition which ran at a loss throughout the 1930s, these new events initially showed a small profit.<sup>111</sup> This was particularly true of the Film Festival which was able to attract elite European audiences, the result of the combination of its location at the exclusive Lido beach resort, its Hollywood atmosphere and the presence of several film stars.

The Theatre Festival comprised a series of outdoor productions directed by Renato Simoni and Guido Salvini. It also included a production of Shakespeare's

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<sup>111</sup> As an example, the First Music Festival registered a profit of 3,075 lire.

‘The Merchant of Venice’, directed by Max Reinhardt, but the festival was primarily devoted to the traditional theatre of Venetian Carlo Goldoni (‘La Bottega del Caffè’, ‘Le Baruffe Chiozzotte’), and it was only after World War II that it began to incorporate more contemporary dramatic forms.<sup>112</sup> The festivals depended directly upon the Biennale administration and the town municipality for event planning and financing<sup>113</sup> (although other institutions such as the Ciga or the Consorzio Alberghi di Lido were amongst the patrons<sup>114</sup>). Close contact with the Biennale entourage and supervision from the town council lasted for the entire decade, along with mutual promises to ‘keep each other informed on any aspects of the festivals’ management’.<sup>115</sup>

The Music Festival was the first event of international contemporary music held in Venice. The first edition took place at the Theatre *La Fenice* from 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> September 1930 (with one concert held at the Ciga’s Excelsior Theatre). Repertoires included symphony and chamber music as well as opera, and the executive committee was headed by Adriano Lualdi (see also chapter 2). Amongst the musical conductors there were well-known *maestri* such as Tullio Serafin. The event was sanctioned by Fascism with the Committee of Honour including leading Fascist figures such as Balbino Giuliano, Minister of National Education, Giuseppe Bottai, Minister of Corporations, Costanzo Ciano, Minister of Communications and Achille Starace, vice-secretary of the PNF.<sup>116</sup>

The First Music Festival achieved wide success and the executive committee was pleased with financial results.<sup>117</sup> On 3 February 1930, Lualdi informed Mussolini that the festival had made a valuable profit, before urging that,

<sup>112</sup> Rizzi, di Martino, *Storia della Biennale*, p. 37.

<sup>113</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Poderstarili, ‘Contributo del Comune per il Festival Musicale in occasione della XVIII Biennale d’Arte’, trim. I, 1932, n. 406.

<sup>114</sup> Scotto Lavina, ‘1927, 1936’, in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia*, 32, 82, p. 29.

<sup>115</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbalì delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 14 April 1937.

<sup>116</sup> Alberto Abruzzese, ‘“J’accepte bien volontiers...” Louis Lumière’, in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia* 32, 82, p. 98.

<sup>117</sup> According to music historian Fiamma Nicolodi, in 1925, the International Society of Contemporary Music chose Venice to stage its festival and overall takings (one million and half lire) were as conspicuous as to stimulate the birth of the Venetian Music Festival in 1930. Therefore, it was economic considerations and not ideology that prompt the birth of the event. (Fiamma Nicolodi, ‘Su alcuni aspetti dei Festivals tra le due guerre’, in *Musica Italiana del Novecento – La Generazione dell’Ottanta*, Atti del Convegno, Firenze 9-10-11 May 1980, Olschki, Firenze, 1981, p.



what he called a ‘fortuitous experiment’ should be repeated in 1932, a decision justified by the ‘considerable advantage that this kind of event could bring, not only artistically, but also to the Venetian tourist movement’.<sup>118</sup> As a result, in 1932, the Podestà determined that 35,000 lire would be invested in the Music Festival. Not only was this justified with reference to Venice’s ‘ancient music traditions’, but the fact that the first festival had proved so popular, contributing to the attraction of a considerable number of tourists to Venice, ‘with all the rewards related to it’, was also a major consideration.<sup>119</sup>

Some months later, Bazzoni updated Volpi on the financial position of the Theatre and Music festivals: ‘The festivals do show some deficit’ he stated, ‘nonetheless, its extent is not so important as to alarm us, especially if we think of the moral value attached to these celebrations, as well as the material benefit brought to the whole town by the increased tourist movement’.<sup>120</sup> In 1934, reinvigorating the tourist industry was still one of the chief concerns in Venice; in its third edition, the Music Biennale had been greeted by its president as a key moment of the tourist calendar. On 31 July, Volpi announced to Bazzoni that he was most enthusiastic about the festivals. Thereafter he encouraged Bazzoni: ‘You must have noticed from the papers that the Biennale festivals have dramatically increased the numbers of tourists that month. You should draw the relevant information from our Tourist Office and dispatch them to the next committee meeting [of the Biennale]. Also, when you can, have a glance at the article ‘The development of the tourist movement in Venice and the Lido’, printed in today’s *Gazzetta di Venezia*’.<sup>121</sup> According to the article, the Tourist Office reported that the number of foreigners visiting the lagoon in the second decade of July had raised by 2,019 in town, and 368 in the Lido, compared with the previous years’ figures. Volpi believed that this success was due not just to the natural appeal of Venice and

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<sup>118</sup> Scotto Lavina, ‘1927, 1936’, in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia*, 32, 82, p. 29.

<sup>119</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Poderstarili, ‘Contributo del Comune per il Festival Musicale in occasione della XVIII Biennale d’Arte’, trim. I, 1932, n. 406.

<sup>120</sup> Bazzoni to Volpi, 14 June 1932, ASAC, Serie Materiale da Riordinare, ‘Ufficio Stampa/Amministrazione 1932’.

<sup>121</sup> Volpi to Bazzoni, 31 July 1934, ASAC, Serie Materiale da Riordinare, ‘Ufficio Stampa/Amministrazione 1934’.

the Lido, but 'to events such as the first Theatre Festival at the 19<sup>th</sup> Biennale. No doubt the Music and Cinema festivals [would] be of benefit to the forthcoming summer season, too'.<sup>122</sup>

The Biennale administration was convinced that, by allowing an enlargement of their programme, the festivals were destined to stimulate more and more public interest, bringing correspondingly increased profits.<sup>123</sup> Towards the end of 1934, the entire municipality was quite satisfied with the results produced by the summer cultural festivals and their contribution to tourism. Thereafter, the *Consulta* agreed on an exceptional contribution of 200,000 lire to be settled in favour of future events, 'given the fact that the *Ente Biennale*, faithful to the agenda arranged by a committee including the Podestà of Venice and the Prefect Guido Beer, had successfully co-ordinated the Theatre, Cinema and Music festivals, bringing the city a considerable number of visitors'.<sup>124</sup>

However, as early as 1935, after profits had slowly started wearing thin, Volpi began to express his dissatisfaction with the Poetry convention, which was subsequently abandoned, and there was even uncertainty about the Music Festival because of the high expenses that had been incurred the previous year.<sup>125</sup> On 4 April 1936, the Prefect of Venice contacted Volpi seeking information about 'the ways in which the *Ente Biennale* [had taken] charge of the organisation of the festivals, and which solutions [had been] introduced to relieve their deficit'. Shortly afterwards, Volpi made it clear that the various events could not take place unless the Biennale committee was provided with the necessary funds.<sup>126</sup>

The appointment of Volpi at the head of the Biennale meant that a skilful entrepreneur and negotiator was now in charge of the institution, and was consistently prepared to bargain with Mussolini (who was known to be fond of the Music Festival) in order to obtain additional state funding.<sup>127</sup> In a letter dated 1

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 15 November 1939.

<sup>124</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Contributo straordinario dell'Ente Autonomo Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte', trim. IV, 1934, n. 2599.

<sup>125</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 18 April 1935.

<sup>126</sup> ASAC, Serie Materiale da Riordinare, 'Ufficio Stampa/Amministrazione 1936'.

<sup>127</sup> ACS, Atti della Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (1934-36), busta 3462, prot. 14/1/283. In

June 1933, Volpi declared his loyalty to ~~the~~ 'Fascist civilization': 'If there is an event that deserves moral and material support from Rome, it is our Festival of Music, carrying out its activity in such a Fascist fashion in support of modern art and acclaimed artists!'.<sup>128</sup> In 1936, Volpi wrote to Mussolini again stressing that the Biennale wished to reaffirm the primacy that the Fascist era represented in the art domain in Italy.<sup>129</sup>

At the same time, during one Biennale committee meeting, Volpi expressed his disappointment with the Minister of National Education for having denied additional funds for the complementary festivals, effectively threatening to abolish them and to limit the Biennale's activities (although Volpi did make clear that such actions would not affect the Film Festival, which the Head of Government himself had communicated an interest in retaining, as 'it [was] a fully developed cultural showcase').<sup>130</sup> Maraini, therefore, assessed the awkward financial position of the festivals, and argued that in the forthcoming year the Music and the Theatre events might be cancelled. In this case, the Cinema Festival would be stretched over the summer season and even expanded and enhanced with the creation of additional competitions and prizes.<sup>131</sup>

On 22 April 1936, Ludovico Foscari, President of the *Ente Provinciale per il Turismo di Venezia* asked the *Ente Autonomo Biennale* to forward a list of the events 'of a tourist nature' that were to be staged during the summer season.<sup>132</sup> On 17 May, Volpi responded, asserting that 'after a thoughtful evaluation, for several reasons, not least because of financial restrictions, the committee [had] come to the decision to cancel all the festivals for the upcoming summer, excluding, naturally, the Film Festival to which continuity and autonomy ha[d] been granted by a Royal Decree'.<sup>133</sup> This 'threat' to cancel them was vital in prompting the central

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1936, Volpi wrote to Mussolini again stressing that the Biennale wished to reaffirm the primacy that the Fascist era represented in the art domain in Italy (Ibid).

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, (1930-34), busta 2534, prot. 10/2/717.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, (1934-36), busta 3462, prot. 14/1/283.

<sup>130</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 31 July 1935.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ludovico Foscari to Volpi, 22 April 1936, ASAC, Serie Materiale da Riordinare, 'Ufficio Stampa/Amministrazione 1936'.

<sup>133</sup> Volpi to Foscari, 17 May 1936, ASAC, Serie Materiale da Riordinare, 'Ufficio Stampa

government to award an annual contribution.

Afterwards, a decree issued by the Podestà, approved by the Prefect on 28 August 1936, announced that it was a direct request of the Ministry for the Press and Propaganda that the Biennale continue to host the renowned Music and Theatre festivals in the future.<sup>134</sup> Volpi was asked to gather the local authorities, the members of the *Cooperazione dello Spettacolo* (a body accountable to the Ministry for the Press and Propaganda), and other relevant syndical representatives, to discuss the calendar of events to be staged. Nicola De Pirro, the official 'Theatre Inspector', and General Secretary of the Ministry for the Press and Propaganda wanted the theatre and music events to be organised primarily for artistic reasons. He thus ensured that the Biennale was granted its annual contribution of 200,000 lire. The Podestà himself, 'because the town council [had] the moral duty of aiding those aforementioned biennial events, which were conceived to benefit the city of Venice, as well as to attract foreign tourists', contributed the annual sum of 50,000 lire to be taken from the budget of *La Fenice* Theatre.<sup>135</sup>

In 1938, Volpi again announced that the *Ente Biennale* was going to drop the Music Festival, the organisation of which was now the responsibility of *La Fenice* Theatre. The institution had been reopened that year under municipality supervision and Volpi's stated aim was to avoid 'unnecessary repetition in the musical events',<sup>136</sup> although it is more likely –as suggested before– that he abandoned the festival because of its lack of commercial success.<sup>137</sup>

According to Renzo De Felice and Marla Stone, cultural forms were exploited to promote Italy's and Fascism's prestige within the national borders and overseas,<sup>138</sup> and served to build consensus from the population, especially the young generations, 'within conditions coordinated by the party and the government'.<sup>139</sup> Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that the main reasons for

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/Amministrazione 1936'.

<sup>134</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Contributo del Comune per le manifestazioni collaterali alla XX Biennale', trim. III, 1936, n. 2398.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 14 April 1937.

<sup>137</sup> Both the Music and Theatre festivals were dropped in 1939 until the end of the war.

<sup>138</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini Il Duce*, p. 107.

<sup>139</sup> Stone, 'Challenging cultural categories. The transformation of the Venice Biennale under

hosting cultural festivals in the lagoon and the Venice Biennale of International Arts, had less to do with the indoctrination of young Fascists than the generation of additional revenues and the production of benefits for local commercial interests in Venice and the Lido, all as part of the broader project commenced in the 1930s for the general economic rejuvenation of the area.<sup>140</sup> In the light of this, the continued staging of the Music and Theatre festivals after 1934 fits perfectly with the entrepreneurial attitude proper of Volpi. When Biennale activities proved to be profitable, their president, Volpi, remained pleased to invest in them. On the other hand, were they to be financially unsuccessful, he would have little hesitation in bringing them to a halt, whatever the concern of the Fascist authorities for moral improvement of the Venetian population. For Volpi, the 'nationalisation of the masses', worthy a project as it might be, had little to do with business.

Cultural events in Venice were regarded as part of the responsibility of 'tourist attraction'.<sup>141</sup> Therefore, any interpretation of the festivals as simply part of a national programme for the mobilisation of the masses or the need to spread Fascist ideology would appear to be in need of serious reconsideration. For the local authorities, it was quite natural to preserve their economic well-being before acting to promote the spiritual education of the Italian nation at large. Instead, the approach of art historian Giuliana Tomasella, labelling Volpi's project as the 'tourist re-launch of Venice', provides a far more convincing starting point for understanding the cultural politics of Venice in the 1930s.<sup>142</sup>

It might thus be argued that the real targets of the *Ente Autonomo Biennale* and the Venetian town council were far from the propagandistic aim of forging ideological consensus, and 'modernizing Italian society and the nation through culture. At best, it can be said that, shaping a new national consciousness

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Fascism', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 4, n. 2, summer 1999, p. 188.

<sup>140</sup> Maraini, in the *Rivista di Venezia*, declared: 'This last event [the Music festival] of our glorious art institution [the Biennale] has revealed the enormous material and moral benefit brought into being by the enlightened enterprises of Count Volpi and his close collaborators, enterprises that make Venice, which the Duce has put at the top of the national art hierarchies, into an exclusive arena for intellectual activities and a centre of irresistible attraction of the most prestigious streams of international tourism' (Maraini, 'Il Festival Musicale Veneziano', *La Rivista di Venezia*, September 1932).

<sup>141</sup> 'La VII Festa Internazionale della Musica a Venezia', *La Gazzetta dell'Emilia*, 26 September 1942.

represented a secondary consideration. For Volpi and his Biennale entourage, the life of the festivals was strictly linked to finding a definitive resolution of the town's financial crisis, regardless of how deeply the Minister for the Press and Propaganda desired them to be regularly staged.<sup>143</sup> In Volpi's mind the Theatre and Music festivals were nothing more than commercial products which deserved proper marketing strategies and financial assessment. Such attitude clashed with the primary aims of the regime, revealing the existence of a conflict between local and national expectations. The pragmatic Venetian outlook contained the potential for contrasts with Fascist programmes and the need, expressed by the regime in the 1930s, to consider the musical and dramatic institutions in relation to their ideological purpose.

For the *Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, Fascism had contributed to the musical education of the people through the policies of the Minister of Popular Culture, the activities of the *Dopolavoro*, and the propaganda of the *Gruppi Universitari Fascisti* as well as the syndical organisations. It had created the *Sabato teatrale*, the theatre for the masses and factory concerts. 'Fascist Italy', claimed the newspaper, 'offers the most favourable conditions for the rebirth of music traditions'.<sup>144</sup> *Il Gazzettino di Venezia* focused on the educational function of outdoor theatre productions which had achieved remarkable popularity amongst the *popolo* and worked directly upon *his* consciousness.<sup>145</sup> According to the PNF representative, Guido Mancini, the Music Festival would be best thought of in terms of its educational function, in keeping with the traditional attitudes towards artistic events of the Fascist regime.<sup>146</sup> According to *Il Regime Fascista*, outdoor theatre presented 'a peculiar challenge, essentially a Fascist task in the art field which should go 'towards the people''.<sup>147</sup> The Fascist editorial had reported that Venetian musical events were arranged to spread (as far as possible) knowledge of music among the

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<sup>142</sup> Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra*, p. 15.

<sup>143</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 16 March 1936.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> 'Il teatro all'aperto', *Il Gazzettino di Venezia*, 31 August 1937.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> Gallo, 'Il Ventaglio e Il Campiello nel quadro stupendo di Venezia', *Il Regime Fascista*, 12 July 1939.

wider public and, in particular, among those customarily less likely to attend concerts. It was therefore thought important to 'develop the musical sentiment gradually and carefully'.<sup>148</sup>

Such radical declarations suggest that there existed a desire on the part of the regime to 'educate' Italians through cultural activities. However, the editorial also noted how the venues chosen for the performances in Venice, the so-called *campi*, were not large enough to host the *popolo*.<sup>149</sup> In fact, the *campi* were the ideal size for a limited number of viewers, likely to be an elite audience.<sup>150</sup> Again, local policies could be quite distinct from national requirements.

In the specific case of Venice, cultural politics aimed at wider strata of population demonstrated the ambiguous position of Volpi and the Biennale entourage, caught between the need to increase profits and 'educating the masses'. For them, broadening the class appeal of the Biennale would only occur if it could reasonably be expected to bring beneficial financial gains.

For example, in 1934, Volpi stressed the fact that the Biennale had recently enlarged its field of action so that the town council needed not provide any more cultural events for the upcoming summer season, for the festivals were meant to be 'for the masses' in the first place. 'It is our wish that the Theatre, Music, and Cinema productions host some performances at popular prices' Volpi added.<sup>151</sup> Some months later, *La Rivista di Venezia*, produced by the town council, declared that 'with its fourth edition and the performance of Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* in St. Mark's Square, the Third Music Festival intended to target the masses'.<sup>152</sup> Therefore, it is odd that despite these declarations Volpi refused to subsidise a popular music concert to be held in the Biennale premises during the *40 anni della*

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<sup>148</sup> 'Propaganda musicale', *Il Regime Fascista*, 20 October 1932.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> According to Doug Thompson, 'when Mussolini declared that the theatre in Fascist Italy must become a *teatro per ventimila* (theatre for twenty-thousand), he was insisting on the refocusing of dramatic art so that it could engage (and instruct) the masses and no longer be the prerogative of a small intellectual elite' (Doug Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy: Culture and Conformity 1925-1943*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1991, p. 121).

<sup>151</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. II, 01/02/32-06/07/34, session 26 February 1934.

<sup>152</sup> Zajotti, 'Il III Festival Musicale della Biennale', *La Rivista di Venezia*, August 1934.

*Biennale* Exhibition in 1935, because he was apparently short of funds.<sup>153</sup>

In this regard, on 1 June 1935, Michele Pascolato, president of the provincial section of the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*, had specifically asked Volpi to allow the *Società Orchestrale –Mandolinistica Chitarristica- Lux* to play within the Biennale's gardens. This would enable the music society to acquire the necessary training and 'financial aid' to meet the travel expenses of an upcoming concert tour to Vienna 'with propagandistic aims', the following year.<sup>154</sup> On a similar occasion, Bazzoni forwarded to Volpi the schedule of a set of classical music concerts to be staged at the Biennale Italian pavilion in the summer of 1935. In both cases, Volpi insisted that he could not assist such initiatives, mostly because previous experiments with the town band had failed to live up to expectations, attracting disappointing audiences.<sup>155</sup>

In 1936, when the political situation demanded the forging of a stronger national consensus, the Ministry for the Press and Propaganda demonstrated its determination to see the creation of a popular lyric season financed by the town councils of the main Italian communes. Apparently, this was meant to be *politica nazionale* (a national policy).<sup>156</sup> Problems emerged when the plan was seen to clash with Volpi's own intentions. Aware of Volpi's disillusionment with the Music Festival as 'the most expensive and the least profitable of all the festivals'<sup>157</sup> and his indifference towards active mass participation in the event, the Minister for Press and Propaganda made the decision to shift the burden of organizing popular concerts in Venice on to agencies independent of the *Ente Autonomo Biennale*.<sup>158</sup>

Eventually, the Ministry officials and local authorities reached a compromise choosing the *Centro Lirico Italiano* to undertake the mission instead of the Music Festival. A decree from the Podestà subsequently granted 10,000 lire to

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<sup>153</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, 'Manifestazioni 1935'.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Bazzoni to Volpi, 15 April 1935, ASAC, Serie Segreteria/Arti Visive, 'Corrispondenza 1935'.

<sup>156</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Stagione lirica popolare-sovvenzione', trim. II, 1936, n. 1040.

<sup>157</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 8 February 1936.

<sup>158</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Stagione lirica popolare-sovvenzione', trim. II, 1936, n. 1040.



the Milanese institution to fulfil this 'educational' task.<sup>159</sup> A similar entrepreneurial outlook prevailed when, at the committee meeting of 14 April 1937, Volpi had suggested avoiding staging outdoor music concerts in St. Mark's Square during September because of 'the possibility of bad weather preventing profits from covering basic expenses'.<sup>160</sup>

Once again, Volpi's determination to maximise profits had little to do with mobilising the largest audiences, revealing the existence of a reservoir of resistance to the implementation of national policies in Venice. Popular culture was not always the right answer to the city's economic needs. In the second half of the 1930s, the Mussolinian politics of 'going towards the people',<sup>161</sup> along with the poor economic performances of the festivals, had started to prove disappointing to a Biennale entourage eager to concentrate upon profitable, cultural activities attracting elite audiences. The Biennale administration was opting for a marketing strategy appealing to selected cultural consumers, rather than galvanizing all the masses.

### **3.5 The Venice Biennale festivals and cultural competition**

The fact that cultural production and the entertainment industry were regulated by the state, and that the Biennale had been officially put on top of a hierarchy of art exhibitions was no guarantee of the emergence of an organic national system of cultural showcases headed by the Venetian festivals. Instead, the following section will reveal the existence of many competing realities at the local level, struggling to attract the largest audiences. Volpi remained protective of Venice's 'entertainment' potential, and had become increasingly concerned about the competition from other Italian towns offering rival cultural festivals. According to a survey conducted by Maraini, there were more than 500 exhibitions in Italy in 1935.<sup>162</sup> In Volpi's opinion, overproduction in the field of figurative arts

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> ASAC, 'Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale', vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 17 January 1938.

<sup>161</sup> Nicolodi, 'Su alcuni aspetti dei Festivals', p. 142.

<sup>162</sup> ASAC, 'Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale', vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 16 March 1936.

‘undoubtedly [contributed to] a diminishing public response affecting even the most important events’.<sup>163</sup> For this reason, the government resolution giving pre-eminence to the *Ente Autonomo Biennale*, for its representatives, had more to do with the assertion of Venetian primacy over similar enterprises, than with the simple coordination of national cultural politics. Additionally, Volpi’s role as the main figure in the top-ranking cultural festival earned him the right to be ‘heard by the Head of Government over so vital an argument’.<sup>164</sup>

As an example, in 1936, the Podestà Mario Alverà announced his intention to make representations to Rome about the proposed film festival at Villa Olmo, in the vicinity of Como, ‘very near indeed to its Venetian counterpart’.<sup>165</sup> Alverà feared that the festival at Villa Olmo ‘might be detrimental to Venice’,<sup>166</sup> and resorted to pressurizing the Prefect and the Minister for the Press and Propaganda in order to establish for Venice exclusive rights to this kind of event. Local authorities claimed that the Venice Film Festival had become ‘a magnificent artistic, tourist and economic enterprise’ and that the city should claim as hers any showcase of similar nature. Alverà also recalled that Venice only possessed two paramount events, the Biennale of International Arts and the Cinema Festival, and that the Ministry retained every year two million lire from the balance of the Municipal Casino to finance the development of the Italian film industry.<sup>167</sup> In Alverà’s words, Venice had been bearing a ‘remarkable burden’ in order to be able to support a project ‘which she must consider as hers because she had devised it in the first place’.<sup>168</sup> Furthermore, it was claimed that the city should be granted the right to prevent any similar enterprises from invading her domain: ‘Under no circumstance shall the Biennale be dispossessed of her festivals in favour of other events whose only aim is that of copying the Venetian ones. Other cities should find different entertainments appropriate to their environment’, Alverà

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, Pacco n. 15, busta ‘Mostra Cinematografica Villa Olmo-Como’.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 16 March 1936.

proclaimed.<sup>169</sup>

On 26 December, the Podestà of Como addressed the Podestà of Venice reassuring him that the film festival at Villa Olmo only screened scientific documentaries, and not ‘commercial productions’.<sup>170</sup> He insisted that the only public who attended the festival were those people who periodically paid a visit to the lake in Como, ‘a category of tourists who [were] certainly not drawn away from Venice’.<sup>171</sup> He also maintained that it was vital to Como to treat its tourists to some sort of entertainment in order to avoid the decline of the hotel industry in the area.<sup>172</sup> Subsequently, Manlio Binna, speaking on behalf of Luigi Freddi, Director General of Cinematography, reassured Alverà that the official, in the name of his regard towards the Venice Film Festival, would deal with any forthcoming attraction in the field.<sup>173</sup>

On another occasion, Alverà raised the alarm over the news that St. Moritz, a ski resort in the Swiss Alps, would be hosting a film festival during the winter season. According to him, even though the Como event had not affected Venice severely, it had represented the starting point for other similar ventures, including foreign versions.<sup>174</sup> In 1941, when the Venice Film Festival was a well established feature upon the international cultural landscape, Volpi claimed that it had been a ‘purely Venetian creation not based on an ephemeral success’ and that other analogous endeavours experimented in foreign countries were ‘doomed to failure’.<sup>175</sup>

The issue of competition between Venice and other Italian historic cities over the ‘cultural packages’ offered to their visitors also affected the Music Festival. Up to 1932, the festival had limited its field of action to chamber music, in order not to clash with the ~~May~~<sup>May</sup> *Musicale Fiorentino* which had traditionally put on seasons of opera in Florence. Nonetheless, on 25 April 1932, executives at the *May*

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, Pacco 15, busta ‘Mostra Cinematografica Villa Olmo-Como’.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 17 January 1938.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, session 17 December 1941.

*Musicale Fiorentino* accused the Biennale administration of having invaded its territory and to have appropriated its own ancient traditions.<sup>176</sup> Maraini firmly responded that their festival had been authorized by the Head of Government and that there was no possibility of clash between the two institutions as the Venetian event habitually featured ‘chamber music of an international character’ while its Florentine counterpart had traditionally focused upon opera.<sup>177</sup> In other words, the Biennale entourage claimed not to have intention of competing directly with Florence. In 1934, *La Rivista di Venezia* reported, Florentine authorities opted for an odd-yearly basis activity which ‘ceased any possibility of competition between the two institutions’. This allowed the Venetian festival, which was held only in even years, ‘to fully embrace every sort of musical expression and widen its horizons’.<sup>178</sup> Mussolini expressed his opinion on the matter, declaring:

‘I think that once the Venetian and Florentine manifestations have settled down in order not to disturb each other, there is no valid reason why the Venice Festival should be limited in its means and artistic programmes. You can, from now on, utilise the great orchestra and chorus as well, according to your necessities’.<sup>179</sup>

According to Harvey Sachs, the two cosmopolitan towns of Florence and Venice had chosen to be competitors rather than allies in a common battle against cultural provincialism.<sup>180</sup> Belonging to the same corporate system of syndical exhibitions did not prevent antagonism, indicating that under Fascism cultural production was not unified, revealing fractures and contradictions. Also, membership of the same nation, under the same regime, did not entail that the Venetian ruling class would start thinking on a national level. The well-being of Venice was more important than Fascism’s desire to stage exhibits designed to promote the regime’s magnificence, an example once again, of the local perspective winning out over the national.

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<sup>176</sup> La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia* 32, 82, p. 31.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Zajotti, ‘Il III Festival Musicale della Biennale’.

<sup>179</sup> ASAC, Emeroteca, III Festival Internazionale di Musica, 8-16 September 1934, Programma Ufficiale.

<sup>180</sup> Harvey Sachs, *Musica e Regime. Compositori, Cantanti, Direttori d'Orchestra e la Politica*

With similar considerations in mind, the Podestà habitually refused requests from foreign town councils to host concerts played by the Venetian town band 'as those requests [were] made during the summer season, when the band must play in Venice'.<sup>181</sup> Such policies could clearly be said to run counter to the expressed desire of the regime of forging extended cultural inside and outside the national boundaries in order to bear witness to the greatness of the Italian nation and its cultural heritage.<sup>182</sup>

### 3.6 Conclusions

For Roland Sarti,

'While the Fascists dispersed their energies in the pursuit of multiple and often conflicting goals, the industrialists concentrated on retaining maximum independence in the management of their enterprises and trade associations (...) The industrialists looked upon political activity in a purely instrumental way. Politics was a means of keeping the government on the path of economic and social orthodoxy'.<sup>183</sup>

By the same token, Volpi remained a businessman who used the regime to serve his own interests, in a bid to restrain Fascist state interference in private enterprise especially in the first years of the regime. Later, he was able to combine Fascist ideology with the image of a reborn, commercially successful Venice. For Volpi, praising Fascist 'modernization' and linking it to local achievements justified the commercialisation of culture for the sake of regional economic rejuvenation.

Volpi's aim, was first of all, to satisfy the town's need to expand the summer tourist season. It is crucial to understand that he planned to do this in tandem with central government, taking advantage of the regime's desire to boost mass tourism as a means of fostering national consciousness. As a businessman

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*Culturale Fascista*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1987, p. 119.

<sup>181</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 24 March 1937.

<sup>182</sup> As an example, the Biennale was charged with the task of arranging art exhibits in the main European cities, which were supposedly an extension of the network created by the syndical system in Italy.

<sup>183</sup> Roland Sarti, *Fascism and the Industrial Leadership in Italy, 1919-1940*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1971, pp. 1-2.

with major interests and investments in the Venetian area, Volpi deliberately bound his project of industrial and tourist development of Venice up with the broader Fascist political objective of winning mass consent. The growth of popular tourism in the lagoon could sit easily with the regime's aspiration to mobilise the Italian population through the mass perception of Fascist modernity (for example with the use of modern means of transport, such as the train, the symbolic 'image of party discipline and state power'<sup>184</sup>), through mass holidaying (and its accompanying inculcation of Italian awareness), or through cultural events (of which the Biennale provides the most obvious example). For this reason, it was essential that the municipality demonstrated its loyalty to the regime and its accomplishments, and that local actions could be incorporated within the wider picture of Fascist policies.

This chapter has also exposed the existence of clashes in the formation of cultural policies, between the central government and the Venetian ruling class, revealing that there were many cracks in the Italian totalitarian system, and that local exigencies in the cultural field might not take into consideration the Fascist desire of nationalising the masses. The economic function attached to the Biennale festivals meant that Volpi attempted to 'merchandise' them only when they were profitable, regardless of their inherent cultural value.

Porto Marghera was not just the product of local investments and capitals, but through Volpi it embodied 'a complex web of financial and industrial interests, opening up to national and international markets'.<sup>185</sup> The connivance of Fascism was therefore vital, and Volpi stood out as the most suitable mediator between local and national administrations. His appointment as Minister of Finances fitted within a context of alliances between Fascism, directed towards the transformation of the state, and big capital, which allowed the full development of Marghera.

The Venetian port continued to represent the 'gateway to the Orient' in the Adriatic, now combined with a major industrial area. These possibilities were grasped by the great financial and trade interests in Italy who saw in Marghera a fortuitous convergence of industrial settlements, fiscal exemptions, energy at low-

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<sup>184</sup> Foster, 'Foreword', in Schnapp, *Staging Fascism*, p. XVII.

<sup>185</sup> Reberschak, 'Gli uomini capitali', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1264.

cost and reduction of production and transport expenses.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, as Bosworth has concluded:

‘The political history of the city [Venice] from 1911 to 1943 might best be summed up as the story of the irresistible rise of Giuseppe Volpi, Count of Misurata, not so much a Fascist true believer as a political chameleon, a man with a good head for business and an anxious willingness to take on more and more positions of responsibility and status’.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Bosworth, ‘Venice, 1911-45’, p. 18.

#### 4. The Venice Biennale of International Arts in the 1930s

Much of the literature on the Venice Biennale produced in the past twenty years has focused upon the extent to which the institution succeeded in preserving its independence from an increasingly intrusive state bearing an all-pervasive ideology. For example, the work edited by the *Ente Autonomo Biennale* in 1982 investigated precisely this complex relationship between the Biennale, the authorities in Rome, and the various ideological concessions that the central government made to the institution.<sup>1</sup> Attention is drawn to a series of episodes characterized by Venetian demands for autonomy and self-determination from a reluctant Fascist bureaucracy presented as a powerful and highly interventionist force.<sup>2</sup> For the Biennale, 1930 symbolized a watershed. Before this date, the institution was still a local body steeped in regionalism and dependent upon the Venetian municipality; afterwards, it was transformed into the site of a series of struggles between core and periphery (between the *Ente Biennale* and the regime). Financial stability and national recognition were obtained at the cost of the loss of a sense of 'Venetianness' at the *Ente*. In other words, the state provided regular financial contributions towards the Biennale which, in turn, became an organism under Fascist control.<sup>3</sup> According to the source mentioned above, it was within this framework that Volpi and the Biennale circle operated to preserve the identity of the exhibition caught between local and national realities.<sup>4</sup>

Other sources have focused on the aesthetic role of the institution within the wider art world. They have considered the Venice Biennale as a contested terrain, the site of struggles for pre-eminence between classical art forms (traditionally dominant at the exhibition since its inauguration in 1895) and avant-garde art (which made a major impression in the 1920s, particularly during Vittorio Pica's period as secretary general).<sup>5</sup> In this way, the Biennale functioned as a symbol and a force for Italian 'modernisation', serving to redefine national and international

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<sup>1</sup> Scotto Lavina, '1927, 1936', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia* 32, 82, pp. 19-31.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance, Rizzi, di Martino, *Storia della Biennale*, p. 32; Romolo Bazzoni, *60 Anni della*



taste in the Fascist period, especially through the introduction of the 'Novecento' movement<sup>6</sup> at the 1928 Biennale.

Finally, there are those historians who have anticipated the connection between cultural events and the entertainment industry, identifying the Biennale festivals as facilitators for the local economy. The Volpian era was regarded as an attempt to breathe a new life into the Biennale system (upon which the economic well being of the Volpi-dominated hotel industry depended).<sup>7</sup> However, few scholars have systematically analysed the enterprise as a full part of a sophisticated plan for the 'cultural industrialization' of Venice, or the economic strategies adopted by the institution to enable it to survive in a notoriously volatile and competitive international art market.

This chapter addresses these questions in detail, investigating the relationship between the Venice Biennale of International Arts as a truly commercial body and the forces shaping the national and international art markets. What at first glance have appeared to be ideologically driven aspects of the Biennale (such as the need to host various styles and art schools) can be convincingly explained by predominantly economic and commercial imperatives. There is thus a common line with previous chapters and the argument that tourism and pragmatism were of more importance than Fascist rhetoric. For the Biennale entourage, the first priority was to confront Venice's deepening economic crisis and to tailor the Exhibition of International Arts accordingly. If this meant elevating commercial factors over ideological principles then so be it.

The chapter has been divided into three parts: the first one focuses on the Biennale of International Arts as an institution deeply embedded within the economic structures and interests of the city, its commercial function largely established and institutionalised before Fascism had come to power. Crucial changes in the administrative structure are also taken into consideration: with the official assertion of Fascist state control over the *Ente Autonomo Biennale* in 1930,

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*Biennale di Venezia*, Venezia, Lombroso Editore, 1962, p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> According to Stone, 'Novecento' artists such as Mario Sironi, Carlo Carrà and Felice Casorati, 'tended to work in blocky, solid forms, [and] shared an interest in the architecturalism and its formal values. They depended on common themes and images, such as women, landscapes, still lifes, and mythological scenes' (Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 47).

the exhibition obtained recognition from the government, financial stability and pre-eminence over similar initiatives in other cities. The second part deals with the Biennale as a cultural institution fostering and facilitating the growth of a private art market by acting as a mediator between patrons and artists. Through the implementation of reforms aimed at enhancing the commercial appeal of the exhibition, the Biennale, before being a Fascist institution, had come to rank alongside other leading private art galleries. The third section analyses the establishment of the decorative arts pavilion within the Venice Biennale, considering the ways in which it was created to resolve the crisis afflicting traditional Venetian crafts, and expanding the range of cultural products on offer by presenting potential customers with more ‘democratised’ art forms, more suitable for the developing private market.

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance, Rizzi, di Martino, *Storia della Biennale*, p. 37.

## **Part One: The structures**

### **4.1 The Biennale as a commercial institution cloaked in culture: from Liberalism to Fascism**

Recently, Marla Stone has analysed the transformation of the Venice Biennale under Fascism. According to Stone, exhibitions have played a central role in Western national self-representation since the mid nineteenth century:

‘With the expansion of the public sphere that accompanied the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of the Liberal state, many Western societies used exhibitions to represent political, social and economic ideologies. In the wake of the highly successful British Crystal Palace - exposition of 1851, governments from monarchies to parliamentary democracies to dictatorships devoted increasing amounts of money and attention to national and international industrial and art shows. From the American celebration of westward expansion to the British glorifications of industry and empire, exhibitions introduced many people to the dominant narratives of their respective societies’.<sup>8</sup>

Italy’s Fascist regime organised an increasing number of exhibitions during its period in office, especially regional events after 1926.<sup>9</sup> Stone has argued that Fascist exhibitions were mainly ideological, noting that they ‘played a central role in its [Fascism’s] aestheticized politics’ and that they were ‘designed to represent and define the cultural sphere’.<sup>10</sup> Before the Fascist era, the Biennale hosted a limited number of genres, styles and artists. After 1922, it was restructured to welcome ‘the new professional and white-collar middle classes’.<sup>11</sup> The regime sought and ‘pursued the legitimacy and continuity it found in elite culture and the cultural consensus possible in a successful mobilisation of mass culture’.<sup>12</sup> Stone considers the event as a major if not the central element in the regime’s aesthetic self-representation and for its drive towards an ideologically motivated consensus. In response, however, it might be claimed that this was only partially the case. That commercial factors exerted a greater degree of influence upon Venetian cultural tourism than ideological considerations has already been emphasized, and in this

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<sup>8</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Stone, ‘Challenging cultural categories’, p. 184.

chapter, it will be argued that the Biennale of International Arts should be regarded in a similar light.

The last years of the nineteenth century represented a period of economic expansion in Europe. Unprecedented levels of newly acquired wealth and economic power allowed the bourgeoisie, with its new-found status, to invest more and more time in leisure activities. In Venice, leisure had always meant tourism, and in particular cultural tourism. In this sense, culture had been employed to serve tourism and commerce, and the Biennale of International Arts had come to stand at the point of intersection between the three. It retained, therefore, not only a paramount cultural role, but also a vital commercial function.

In 1933, the journal *Il Lavoro Fascista*, an official party organ, claimed that the Venice Biennale was the means through which 'Fascism [had] established itself in the city of the Doges'.<sup>13</sup> As a cultural event of international standing, it was natural that the Fascist regime would seek to impose its influence upon it. However, local priorities led the Venetian authorities in a rather different direction. The hypothesis to be developed here is that the Biennale was founded as a tourist-cultural enterprise, promoted by powerful elites interested in the internationalization of Venice as a commercial centre. This contention is supported by the fact that in the 1930s, the Biennale administration, following the remarkable industrial expansion of Porto Marghera and the subsequent concentration of tourist activities in the historic town, added new events (the Music, Theatre and Cinema festivals) to complement the elite forms of cultural tourism prevalent in the first decades of the 20th century.<sup>14</sup> The exploitation of the Biennale to benefit local commercial interest demonstrates not only how the city and its events were increasingly being commercialized and commodified, but also how its status as a major tourist destination was evolving. In other words, the Biennale developed according to a set of economic priorities which Venetian trading elites regarded as defining the role and function of the institution.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> 'Il genio, la tecnica e la produzione italiana nelle imponenti manifestazioni delle grandi mostre', *Il Lavoro Fascista*, 5 October 1933.

<sup>14</sup> The Biennale executive committee was in charge of both the artistic and administrative management in the figure of the secretary general and the administrative director.

For Lawrence Alloway, 'exhibitions are propaganda, not only for our transformed sense of scale, but for specific projects, mercantile in the case of the Great Exhibition, tourist in the case of the Venice Biennale'.<sup>15</sup> The point being driven home here is that, for the Biennale, the reinvigoration of the tourist industry was far more relevant than any promotion of Fascist themes and values. This conception led to the decision to include the work of foreign artists at the Biennale, a decision intended to widen the exhibition's appeal to visitors from overseas.<sup>16</sup>

Evidently, the Biennale, held since the last years of the nineteenth century, pre-dated the establishment of the Fascist regime. Inaugurated in 1895, it was conceived as a response to Venice's economic decline by *fin de siècle* elites who hoped it would bring new sources of revenue and international acclaim to the city.<sup>17</sup> A prestigious exhibition, if carefully timed to coincide with the summer tourist season, might well provide the resolution of Venice's economic problems. Antonio Fradeletto, the first Secretary General of the Biennale, once declared:

'Venetian citizens were asked to form a committee with the task of proposing the main points of a statute which was to rule the future exhibitions. This had the double aim of regulating the display of works of art and the creation of an artistic market in which the city of Venice might find some economic relief'.<sup>18</sup>

The committee had to be composed of residents known for their 'love of the arts and long-time business skills, as well as artists resident in the city of Venice. Moreover, it was also to suggest the means to achieve the best results in the artistic as well as the economic domain'.<sup>19</sup> It is significant that several members of the local business class were indeed to be found on the committee, including Giancarlo Stucky (see chapter 3), M. Guggenheim, successful creator of artistic furniture and Niccolò Papadopoli, a wealthy, noble Venetian entrepreneur (both Stucky and Papadopoli would later become involved in Volpi's project for the construction of

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<sup>15</sup> Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-196. From Salon to Goldfish Bowl*, London, Faber & Faber, 1968, p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Sartorello, *Funzione e Collocazione degli Istituti Espositivi d'Arte*, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> Bazzoni, *60 Anni della Biennale di Venezia*, p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

the industrial port in Venice).

Under the Fascist regime, the connections between local capitalist elites and Venetian cultural circles became more evident as the related projects of fostering tourism and promoting the cultural industrialization of the city were both pursued.<sup>20</sup> In 1930, when a Royal Decree transformed the Biennale into an autonomous institution under direct control of the regime,<sup>21</sup> Antonio Maraini, retaining the position of secretary general, declared that the institution ought to become a business in order to adapt itself to the 'modern Fascist world'. It could no longer rely on amateurish or random improvisation, but needed to institute coordinated economic policies and financial planning. In short, it would require the same rational administration of resources as any other successful industrial or commercial enterprise.<sup>22</sup> The official charter, under article 5, established that the Biennale should organize outdoor theatre plays during the summer season and concentrate <sup>on</sup> the concerts and ballets of the Music Festival in September and October in order to prolong the tourist season.<sup>23</sup> Article 12 stated that the executive committee, alongside other government, party and Biennale personnel, should include the Undersecretary for Tourism (*Direzione Generale per il Turismo*) and the Undersecretary for Commerce (*Direzione Generale per il Commercio*), an undersecretariat at the Ministry of Corporations. Significantly, the subcommittee charged with the task of coordinating the Film, Music and Theatre festivals was to include among its members the President of the *Ente Provinciale del Turismo* (Provincial Agency for Tourism) who did not sit on the committee that oversaw the arts exhibition.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, the Venetian authorities saw the Biennale as providing an aesthetic-cultural patina to what should properly be regarded as a predominantly

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<sup>20</sup> Maraini expressed his hopes that the fact that Volpi was no longer Minister of Finances would not interfere with further steps to be undertaken by the Biennale, one being the decree of recognition of autonomy of the institution (ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, 'Pubblicità' 1930').

<sup>21</sup> As cited in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *La Biennale di Venezia*, pp. X-XIV: Regio Decreto Legge 13 January 1930, *La Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, n. 33, 12 February 1930.

<sup>22</sup> Maraini, 'Il nuovo assetto della Biennale Veneziana', *Rassegna dell'Istruzione artistica*, February 1930.

<sup>23</sup> As cited in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *La Biennale di Venezia*, p. XIV: Regio Decreto Legge 21 July 1938-XVI 'Nuovo Ordinamento dell'Esposizione biennale internazionale d'arte di Venezia', *La Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, n. 229, 6 October 1938.

commercial phenomenon serving the Venetian hotel and tourist industries. As has been noted before, the revitalization of the tourist sector in the post-war period of economic depression had become a major objective of the Venetian municipality. As a direct result of the war and the decline of the tourist industry, the Biennale in the 1920s was no longer drawing the number of visitors to which it had become accustomed. 431,000 visitors had attended in 1912, but this figure had declined precipitously to just 172,000 in 1928.<sup>25</sup> The institution was short of funds to finance various prizes and there were few official purchases made by national public bodies: in the 1920s works of art were acquired only by the Gallery of Modern Art (*Galleria d'Arte Moderna*) on behalf of the Venice municipality. The following figures give an idea of the difficulties that afflicted the exhibition in those years:<sup>26</sup>

<b>Biennales</b>	<b>Sales figures*</b>	<b>Visitors</b>	<b>Purchases</b>
1920 -XII	2,628,747	240,510	682
1922 -XIII	1,251,456	380,544	575
1924 -XIV	2,548,901	319,853	885
1926 -XV	2,427,836	201,025	367
1928 -XVI	1,434,747	172,841	350
1930 -XVII	1,407,892	193,003	462

\* Sales figures are expressed in lire

Some influential Venetians thought that the solution should come from the state. In 1928, Antonio Maraini replaced Vittorio Pica as the Secretary General of the Biennale. Soon afterwards, a Royal Decree confirmed the permanent character of the exhibition, allowing it to benefit from customs exemptions and train fare reductions. All other Italian exhibitions were subject to annual authorization by the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *La Biennale di Venezia*, p. III.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Head of Government and the relevant ministers.<sup>27</sup> The Podestà of Venice, Pietro Orsi, was exultant after the official recognition of the Biennale,<sup>28</sup> although his delight might well have been tempered had he known he was soon to be replaced by Ettore Zorzi, appointed by the central government.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, this decision was in some respects a surprising one as Orsi had seemed willing to place the Biennale at the service of the Fascist regime.<sup>30</sup>

In 1930, a Royal Decree authorised a series of public works such as the 'Littorio' bridge, the huge car park located in Piazzale Roma, and the Nicelli airport. Piazzale Roma was soon afterwards linked with St. Mark's Square and the cultural heart of Venice,<sup>31</sup> ready to appeal to a more expansive tourist clientele. Even Stone, initially arguing that the Biennale represented 'an instance of Fascist dominance obtained through ideological and cultural means',<sup>32</sup> recognises the strength of the commercial forces operating upon the event:

'The addition of an array of evening activities was tied to the expanded tourist packaging of the Biennale. After 1932, on any given evening, visitors could partake of a variety of attractions, including folkloric festivals and regattas on the Venetian canals. The diversified Biennale stressed the consumption of the 'Venetian experience', in the form of a surfeit of Venetian imagery and references, from the Goldoni productions of the theatre festival to the gondolas and masks of the promotional literature. Of course, these images were in symbiosis with the inexpensive and readily available souvenirs carrying the same ones. (...) Visitors could make extended trips, partake of a range of activities, select, choose and consume plays, music, film and the fine arts. Each of these attractions mobilized the consumptive possibilities of culture and of Venice itself by being situated in various parts of the city and requiring that the spectator move through the city to attend them. The 1934

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<sup>27</sup> As cited in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *La Biennale di Venezia*, p. VIII: Regio Decreto Legge 24 December 1928 'Autorizzazione in via permanente della Esposizione internazionale d'arte di Venezia e della Esposizione quadriennale nazionale d'arte' di Roma, *La Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, n. 19, 23 January 1929.

<sup>28</sup> AMV, Orsi, *Brevissima Sommatoria Relazione*, Venezia, 1929.

<sup>29</sup> Bazzoni, *60 Anni della Biennale di Venezia*, p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> Back in 1927, Orsi had declared: 'The Venetian *Esposizione* constitutes an event of such importance that I must attach to the request of authorization of the XVI Biennale some brief explanations of the way in which we intend to push to the maximum every practical activity and we plan to frame the Venice Biennale within the grandiose project of national renovation cherished by Fascism' (Orsi, 'La relazione al Duce per il riconoscimento dell'Esposizione di Venezia', *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 26 November 1927).

<sup>31</sup> AMV, Orsi, *Brevissima Sommatoria Relazione*, p. 108.

<sup>32</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 15.



Biennale brochure underlined the limitless attractions of the event: the brochure was divided into seven promotional sections -film, fine arts, decorative arts, music, theatre, traditional feasts and sport competitions- and exceptional railway reductions'.<sup>33</sup>

This provides an illustration of the extent to which the 'commodification' of the Biennale had been achieved in the 1930s, transforming the event into a series of commercial transactions within an international cultural market. It was also decided that the *Giardini Castello*, the traditional location of the exhibition, was to be included among those sites served by *Rio Nuovo*, a quicker waterway that flowed from Piazzale Roma to the core of Venice, and from which the Biennale itself was to benefit directly. Soon afterwards, the old bank beside the gardens was extensively redesigned and embellished, becoming known, in true Fascist style, as the *Riva dell'Impero* (Imperial Bank).<sup>34</sup>

Relief for the financial and organizational problems of the Biennale came in 1930, the year that Mussolini decided 'to bring the arts under the umbrella of the Fascist revolution'.<sup>35</sup> Thereafter another Royal Decree unilaterally transformed the exhibition into the 'Autonomous Agency of the Venice Biennale' (*Ente Autonomo La Biennale di Venezia*).<sup>36</sup> The new administrative committee was appointed by the Head of the State, drawing from the advice of the Minister of National Education, the Minister of Corporations and the Minister of the Interior. However, it included some familiar figures such as Maraini, Ettore Ciardi, and the Podestà Zorzi.<sup>37</sup>

The establishment of the Biennale as a state agency was perceived by some to be a betrayal of the Venetian municipality but the potential controversy was reduced as a result of the appointment of a Venetian as President of the Biennale. In recognition of the 'Venetianness' of the institution it was decided that a well-known Venetian figure be appointed as president, providing Volpi with the opportunity to assume the mantle of the 'saviour' of the institution.<sup>38</sup> Fascist authorities

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<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, 'Challenging cultural categories', pp. 101-05.

<sup>34</sup> Distefano, Paladini, *Storia di Venezia*, p. 108.

<sup>35</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 33

<sup>36</sup> As cited in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *La Biennale di Venezia*, pp. X-XIV: Regio Decreto Legge 13 January 1930, *La Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, n. 33, 12 February 1930.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Sergio Bettini, 'Un futuro per la Biennale', *La Rivista Veneta*, n. 10, May 1969.

strategically stressed both the national and local nature of the Biennale, and it was quickly decided that the exhibition should continue to be inaugurated on St. Mark's day.<sup>39</sup> Volpi reassured Venetians about the new arrangements in the periodical *Le Tre Venezie* (a monthly review edited under the auspices of the Fascist Provincial Federation of Venice<sup>40</sup>): 'The legislation does not affect our actions and aims, it is Venice in her incomparable artistic tradition which hails and judges. It is Venice which consecrates artists to posterity'.<sup>41</sup>

~~All of which~~ <sup>This</sup> again suggests that, despite outward appearances, the events of 1930 brought with them a marked divergence from the stated aims of the central government. For the Biennale administrative board, commercial pragmatism determined priorities: though Fascism was given the right to intervene in questions concerning the institution, Volpi had been granted official sponsorship for his plan to develop the Biennale as the centrepiece of a campaign to boost tourism and support the local hotel industry. Moreover, the regime had conceded the Venice Biennale a pre-eminent status in comparison with other Italian cultural events, something that would enable the Venetians to undermine potential competition from similar enterprises elsewhere in Italy (see chapter 3).<sup>42</sup> In this respect, Maraini's words, reported in the local newspaper *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, are significant. 'Referring to the Biennale', he stated, 'we do not mean just an Italian art exhibition placed on top of other national artistic events by the Fascist regime, but also an exhibition that is first of all Venetian and international, a meeting point of the world's art'.<sup>43</sup>

Once the regime had tackled the issue of reform at the Biennale, it found itself drawn into questions of state funding, and negotiations over this issue initiated heated debates between the central government, the provincial administration and the Venetian municipality. In order to put an end to these disputes, the Ministry of Education declared that the state would participate

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<sup>39</sup> AMV, Affari Generali del Comune di Venezia, quinquennio 1921-1925, fascicolo VII/13/7, 'Inviti alla inaugurazione della XIV Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte'.

<sup>40</sup> Volpi, 'La XVII Biennale', *Le Tre Venezie*, April 1930.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Maraini, 'La nuova Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte', *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 14 September 1930.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

annually with grants amounting to 200,000 lire, while the local administration provided 150,000 lire and the province of Venice 50,000 lire.<sup>44</sup> It is striking to see that by the end of the 1930s, with Europe sliding towards war, contributions to the Biennale from the *Minculpop* (Ministry of Popular Culture) were ascribed to the section 'Costs for propaganda', an administrative device which later allowed Maraini to ask the Minister of Finance for additional state funds for the 1941 Theatre Festival, precisely because of the plays to be staged, 'Il Conte di Carmagnola' which was 'of striking Venetian character', and Goethe's 'Faust' which could be characterised as 'overtly anti-English'.<sup>45</sup>

Ultimately, the newly acquired official status of the institution was geared towards the purpose of solving its financial problems. By 1934, Maraini was in the position to declare: 'The Biennale of International Arts has appealed to people from all countries giving a significant boost to local tourism and doubling the level of guests since the last event'. Attendance was now satisfactory, reaching 250,000 visitors in 1932 and continuing to rise to 450,000 in 1934.<sup>46</sup> For the local council, the most important thing was that, despite the new levels of state intervention and the subsequent loss of administrative freedoms, the Venice Biennale had at last achieved financial stability. Though this meant a higher degree of control from the regime, the Biennale circle was only too happy to receive additional funds to revive the institution and consequently Venetian tourism.

#### 4.2 Searching for approval from Fascism<sup>47</sup>

The minutes of the Biennale administrative board suggest that local and national identities could coexist without difficulty in Venice,<sup>48</sup> while indicating that the Venetian municipality sought constant recognition from the Fascist regime for

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<sup>44</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> ACS, Ministero per la Cultura Popolare, busta n. 209, 'Sovvenzioni 1931-1943', 7 November 1942.

<sup>46</sup> ACS, Telegram, Maraini and Volpi to Mussolini, 17 October 1934, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (1934-36), busta 3462, prot.14.I.283, sottofascicolo 5.

<sup>47</sup> Even though this chapter mainly focuses upon the Biennale of figurative arts, this section takes into consideration the subsidiary festivals (this applies to section 4.3, too).

<sup>48</sup> On 23 January, Maraini again contacted Mussolini to let him know that 'the collateral festivals would greatly contribute to the level of tourism the city of Venice, in accordance to the desire of the Head of the Government' (Scotto Lavina, '1927, 1936', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia* 32,

its projects. On the other hand, they also reveal the manipulation of national Fascist policies by the commercial interests of the city. It is easy to see why formal sanction from Fascism was essential, as only this could provide the financial stability and organisational freedom needed to stage the events effectively.

At the first meeting of the newly constituted *Ente Autonomo Biennale* committee on 27 February 1930, Volpi made it clear that a compromise had to be found between the traditions of ‘*venezianità*’, modern financial planning and the regime’s political requirements.<sup>49</sup> In so doing, the Venetian ruling class aimed at linking local identity and Fascist ideology to the common object of economic resurgence. Political rhetoric could be supported if it assisted in facilitating a blossoming of commerce in the area. On 23 and 24 October 1932, the Biennale circle held a Fascist Convention of Arts with the aim of bringing exhibitions of fine arts, music, theatre, cinema, architecture, poetry and decorative arts under one roof. What is remarkable is that the official programme, signed by Volpi, Maraini and Suppiej,<sup>50</sup> specified under article 4 that the convention was meant to be a tribute that the Biennale organisation was paying to the ‘vast work of reconstruction operated by Fascism and the Regime in order to reaffirm the grandeur of Italian art’.<sup>51</sup> By the same token, some months later, Volpi insisted before the committee members that the 18<sup>th</sup> Biennale had fulfilled broader goals than the previous ones, because, for the first time, it came to include other cultural forms beside the art exhibition; moreover it had increased the number of foreign pavilions built in the island of Sant’Elena. Such tremendous success, both financial and artistic, according to Volpi, was testimony to ‘the cultural blossoming that Italy had witnessed in ten years of Fascist government’.<sup>52</sup>

At a meeting of 3 October 1933, attention focused upon the newer festivals. Maraini explained that the events had been launched on an experimental basis for

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82, p. 44).

<sup>49</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Ente Biennale, vol. I, 27/02/30-07/12/31, session 27 February 1930.

<sup>50</sup> Federal Secretary of the PNF in Venice (see also chapter 3).

<sup>51</sup> Scotto Lavina, ‘1927, 1936’, in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia* 32, 82, p. 52.

<sup>52</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Ente Biennale, vol. I, 001/02/32-06/07/34, session 15 November 1932.

the first time the previous season, following Mussolini's directions.<sup>53</sup> He was now concerned about possible ways of sustaining them. Volpi shifted the attention of the committee towards local interests, pointing out that the festivals 'should benefit the Biennale exhibition by 20% and the Venetian community by 80%'. Thereafter, he asked the Podestà whether the municipality would consider funding the exhibition in relation to a 'guaranteed economic return allocated to the city'.<sup>54</sup> On another occasion, Volpi argued that the Biennale cinema festival was a very popular and profitable event, although the Theatre and Music festivals were rather less commercially appealing. He continued by claiming that together with artistic merit, another very important goal was being achieved, that of making Venice a more attractive destination which ultimately favoured the Biennale as a whole and the city itself with 'more and more cosmopolitan travellers and upper-class visitors being attracted'.<sup>55</sup>

According to Fiamma Nicolodi, on the eve of the inauguration of the First Music Festival in 1930, Adriano Lualdi declared that the festival programmes 'despite being of international character [were] first and foremost an Italian and Fascist institution'<sup>56</sup> (a reference to the fact that the music performed and composers honoured were predominantly Italian and therefore necessarily Fascist). Nonetheless, the Music Festival, as a commercial enterprise alongside the other Biennale events, was primarily a Venetian creation, compatible with the local strategy of developing tourism and cultural entrepreneurship. It remained essentially concerned with increasing Venetian wealth and economic expansion. In this sense, despite many declarations of loyalty to Fascism, the relationship between the city of Venice, the Biennale institution and the tourist industries <sup>were</sup> ~~was~~ in an important sense independent of Fascist influence.

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<sup>53</sup> On 13 January 1932, Maraini wrote to Mussolini, stating: 'In conformity to the will of Your Excellence that the Biennale contribute as much as possible to the awakening of Venetian economic life, I have put together a programme of collateral events designed to direct each month public interest and the flux of the widest Italian and international tourism towards Venice. (...) Now, to definitely launch the above mentioned programme, and to push it to the maximum, an assessment from Your Excellence would be precious' (Scotto Lavina, '1927, 1936', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia* 32, 82, p. 44).

<sup>54</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. I, 01/02/32-06/07/34, session 3 October 1933.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, session 6 July 1934.

Maraini, in a report presented to a committee meeting of January 1935, explained the reciprocal nature of the bond existing between Venice, tourism and the function of the Biennale of International Arts. He argued:

‘This year the beauty of Venice has attracted a larger audience than ever. (...) The city of remarkable palaces comes alive as the spring season arrives, bringing a bustling crowd, which crosses bridges, wanders through alleys and explores the canals (...). In this way they enjoy Venice’s true spirit. That is why we can agree that the last summer season was a truly ‘Venetian’ one. (...) It is through its highest artistic achievements that the Biennale draws its international acclaim and prestige. If it is from Venice that the exhibition draws its ability to set the highest standards, it is also through these noble arts that the Biennale pays tribute back to Venice. For this reason, the tourist success is not the result, as in many other instances, of meaningless propaganda or exploitation of past glories, but the outcome of substantial values that tend to renew and improve themselves over time. This is the explanation of last season’s success, which witnessed so many young people and cultured gentlemen visiting Venice from overseas; such broad consensus must encourage the Biennale in its bid to make Venice an unrivalled art centre’.<sup>57</sup>

In the committee meeting of 12 May 1941, Volpi welcomed all the artistic proposals outlined by the secretary general for the following summer season, ‘not just for their benefit to tourism, but also because they provide continuity to the Biennale’s activities’. Professor Cornelio Di Marzio, President of the Confederation of Professionals and Artists of Venice, agreed with Volpi, emphasizing the dependence of Venice’s continuing well-being upon the Biennale institution: ‘The Biennale’s function goes beyond the mere artistic domain, it has a *dovere civico* [‘civic duty’] of revitalizing Venice’.<sup>58</sup>

Historically, the Biennale had the primary function of supporting Venice, which bore in turn the task of ‘nourishing’ the exhibition. Here, the *Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte* established a field of action that was larger than the mere cultural domain: it retained a ‘civic function’ which meant the provision of an economic contribution to the city of Venice. As industrial activities were moved to

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<sup>56</sup> Nicolodi, ‘Su alcuni aspetti dei Festivals’, p. 142.

<sup>57</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 28 January 1935.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, session 12 May 1941.

Marghera, the Biennale inherited the role of building up cultural tourism. The frequent communications with Rome had the purpose of ensuring that the aspirations of the Venetian elites fell into line with the central government's policies. It was essential that the specific project of economic revival in Venice be made compatible with the national program of constructing a totalitarian state. Venice, it was thought, could better fulfil her aspirations of commercial development and cultural industrialization when allied to, rather than in conflict with, the Fascist regime.

### 4.3 The neutrality of the Music Festival's repertoires

The programmes designed for the various Biennale Music festivals during the 1930s were indicative of precisely this tension between national cultural policies and local tourist interests. Ultimately, according to Fiamma Nicolodi, 'eclecticism' combined with an openness towards all the musical trends operating in Italy, was the rule.<sup>59</sup> Musical programmes 'stayed away from the demagogic input of going toward the people',<sup>60</sup> and could not really be said to have been agents for the nationalisation of the masses. An example of this is the programme of the Third International Festival of Music covering 8<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> September 1934:

Saturday 8 <sup>th</sup>	Symphonic concert of inauguration. Theatre <i>La Fenice</i> ;
Sunday 9 <sup>th</sup>	Symphonic concert of Nordic Music directed by I. Debrowen. Theatre <i>La Fenice</i> ;
Tuesday 11 <sup>th</sup> .	Symphonic concert of Orchestra directors. Theatre <i>La Fenice</i> ;
Wednesday 12 <sup>th</sup>	'The Mass' by Giuseppe Verdi with Beniamino Gigli. Musical director Tullio Serafin. In St. Mark's Square;
Friday 14 <sup>th</sup>	First presentation of the Viennese Opera 'Così Fan Tutte' by Mozart. Theatre <i>La Fenice</i> ;
Saturday 15 <sup>th</sup>	Theatre of Chamber Music at the Theatre <i>Goldoni</i> ;

<sup>59</sup> Nicolodi, 'Su alcuni aspetti dei Festivals', p. 167.

Sunday 16th                      Symphonic concert of the Viennese Philharmonic Orchestra at the 'Salon de la Ragione' in Padua, directed by Clemens Krauss. Second representation of the Viennese Opera 'Die Frau ohne Schatten' by Richard Strauss. Theatre *La Fenice*.

No one would realistically claim that these performances represented a particularly Fascist or even Italian aesthetic. On the contrary, they were more international than national, in flavour, featuring the great names of European music such as Verdi, Mozart and Strauss. Bosworth too has argued:

'No doubt the Italians were *italianissimi* as composers, but their music and its lyrics frequently invoked liberty, or individuality, or decadence, in ways that were not straightforwardly reconcilable with Fascism, and always suggested that Italian-ness had a history separate from the current regime. If Fascism had not, as it were, completely changed the music, so too its festivals were merely grafted onto a programme which had developed, before 1922, a rhythm of its own, a rhythm which would continue beyond 1945'.<sup>61</sup>

According to the Biennale executive committee, the festival should not be the representative of any single, particular artistic trend but should include 'all the musical voices worthy of being heard'.<sup>62</sup> It thus comes as no surprise to discover that in 1936, a well-known newspaper criticised the programme of the Third Music Festival for having been drawn from the most 'ordinary and commercial symphonic repertoire', and that the character of the performances had clearly revealed 'superfluous popular and tourist intentions'.<sup>63</sup> For Harvey Sachs, the regime was able to use the Music Festival to show its 'openness'. Because Venice was a centre

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 142.

<sup>61</sup> Bosworth, 'Venice, 1911-45', p. 18.

<sup>62</sup> Renato Mariani, 'Sintesi e bilancio del festival musicale veneziano', *L'Ambrosiano*, 15 September 1936.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. By the same token, even an outstanding journal such as the Venetian *Ateneo Veneto* perfectly caught the pragmatic spirit of the Biennale, this time of the Theatre Festival by declaring: 'There is no doubt that the events announced by the Biennale for next July will constitute new, grandiose affirmations for Renato Simoni and Guido Salvini, and a powerful tourist attraction for the Venetian summer'. (Teo Gianniotti, 'La Biennale e il teatro', *Ateneo Veneto*, June 1937).



of international tourism, the state was eager to offer a more cosmopolitan and less autarchic image of itself.<sup>64</sup> Yet, this reveals that, if the festival wished to be a commercial product appealing to a wider public, it could not afford to prioritise explicitly Fascist themes. On the contrary, it had to favour internationalism, cosmopolitanism and the kind of carefree subjects that leisure-seeking tourists would most respond to.

#### **4.4 Resting upon the tourist industry: the Biennale and mass tourism**

The adoption of modern tourist techniques was vital even for a globally renowned event such as the Biennale of International Arts. Despite the economic depression of the 1930s, Venice continued to operate as an elegant and cosmopolitan resort. Beginning in 1930, Maraini and Volpi attempted to widen the Biennale's audience by using travel discounts and advertising techniques traditionally associated with the commercial tourist industry.<sup>65</sup> In view of this, Maraini expanded and modernised the Biennale press office with the regular publication of information, schedules, prizes and discounts, in the local, national and international press.<sup>66</sup> By 1934, Biennale news and advertisements ran in sixty-two national newspapers and fifteen European and American dailies. Discussion about tourist numbers, the arrangement of various discounts, and tourist planning in general were a constant feature of the committee meetings.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Sachs, *Musica e Regime*, p. 116.

<sup>65</sup> Volpi paid particular attention to press relations, a key aspect of any campaign to successfully commercialize the Biennale. Journalists and arts critics, whether Italian or foreign, had been granted special facilities by 1928 (ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 57, 'Pubblicità 1930'). In order to boost the Biennale's reputation, that same year, Arturo Lancellotti, one of Giuseppe Bottai's collaborators, had pleaded with Maraini to grant an invitation to the Marquis de Felice, 'no ordinary reporter' in Lancellotti's words, 'but the founder of the newspaper *Corriere d'Italia*' (Ibid, busta n. 48, 'Pubblicità 1928'). That year, the Biennale administration confirmed a welcoming programme for the foreign press to be launched in 1930. Among the various events, the programme was to include a meeting with the Prefect, a visit to the Biennale followed by lunch offered by the Ciga and the Hotel Excelsior at the Lido, and finally excursions to the glass industries of Murano and the commercial port (Ibid). It is clear that in incorporating commercial venues as well as sites of cultural interest, Volpi's intention was to stress the economic vitality of Venice, not just its cultural prestige.

<sup>66</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 57, 'Pubblicità 1930'. According to a businessman such as Giuseppe Volpi, propaganda made on behalf of the Biennale could not be anything but 'materialistic', in the service of the commercial function of the exhibition, and helping to boost the profits made by the festivals. (ASAC, Serie Materiale da Riordinare, 'Ufficio Stampa-Amministrazione 1936').

<sup>67</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbalì delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol.

In 1939, the Podestà reported that the executive board of the *Ente Provinciale per il Turismo* had expressed its desire that the Venice Biennale, because of its role in 'carrying out an artistic activity which [was] vitally linked to the tourist business,' should make every effort to remain in close communication with the Tourist Office authorities. According to the *Ente*, the Biennale usually communicated its schedules to the Tourist Office in July, too late to be of much use in overseas or even national publicity campaigns. Maraini, writing to the Podestà, defended the position of the Biennale, asserting that the Tourist Office were exaggerating the problem, and pointing out that the institution had been represented by an official at the meeting undertaken by the *Ente Provinciale per il Turismo* in order to define entertainment programmes for the Venetian summer season.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, it was subsequently agreed that the Biennale programmes should reach foreign tourist agencies by February at the latest.<sup>69</sup>

The Biennale administration under Maraini made travel discounts the foundation of its tourist enticement programme.<sup>70</sup> From the study of the minutes of the Biennale committee meetings, it is clear that the finances of the institution greatly benefited from the special fare reductions granted by the central government. On 26 February 1934, one of the committee members announced that a train discount of 70% had led to a corresponding increase in sales of both rail tickets and Biennale membership cards. The latter enjoyed a wide channel of distribution: they were made available in municipal offices, travel agents, bookshops, music shops, stationers, and haberdasher's shops.<sup>71</sup> The Podestà himself added that it was necessary to exploit travel discounts to the maximum, forcing visitors to purchase an entrance ticket to the exhibition by making it compulsory that they punch their travel tickets within the gates of the Biennale. The success of the event was measured in practical terms by the amount of entrance tickets and railcards sold to the public.<sup>72</sup>

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III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 28 January 1935.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 68, 'Pubblicità-1939'.

<sup>70</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 121.

<sup>71</sup> 'XV Esposizione. Gli abbonamenti', *Il Gazzettino di Venezia*, 18 April 1926.

<sup>72</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbalì delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 28 January 1935. See also Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 121.

The *Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee* holds detailed records of guidelines for fare reductions and advertising strategies: 15,000 posters offering discounts were displayed on the Italian train carriages circulating on the main routes. Fare reduction adverts were also placed in telephone directories.<sup>73</sup> In 1928, details of the fare discounts associated with the Biennale were as follows: from 12 May to 17 July, between 28 July and 6 September and from 22 September to 25 October, a 30% discount on the normal train ticket price was available, while from 2 to 11 May, 18 to 27 July, 7 to 21 September and 26 October to 4 November, 50% discounts on train tickets could be obtained.<sup>74</sup>

Clearly the plan was designed as part of a strategy to develop specific periods as high points of the summer season. Eventually, it would include a list of strategic positions (squares and streets of main Italian cities) where the agencies in charge of tourist promotion concentrated the distribution of their advertising material.<sup>75</sup> On 13 March 1930, the Ministry of Finance granted customs exemptions for those works of art that were to be displayed at the Biennale, and on 9 May, it acknowledged that the same works could be transported back without incurring the normal charge.<sup>76</sup>

Marla Stone has argued that ‘Fascist cultural bureaucrats employed several strategies for widening a previously limited cultural institution, broadening content and actively cultivating the attendance of new social groups’.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, it is fair to say that most tourist practices were adopted before Fascism came to power and had little or nothing to do with ‘fascistizing’ audiences (for example, the habit of granting fare reductions and facilities dated back to the nineteenth century). In fact, the Exhibition of International Arts had, since its inception, developed ‘the aim of promoting and favouring the participation of the public as well as assuring to the enterprise a remarkable profit’, and to this end it had consistently lobbied for and obtained special 50% discounts on return tickets to Venice from the National Railway Administration, discounts which came complete with a exhibition

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<sup>73</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 48, ‘Pubblicità 1928’. See also Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 121.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, busta n. 57, ‘Pubblicità 1930’.

membership card valid for the entire season. According to the Biennale executive board, these tickets were an innovation of the Exhibition of International Arts and the regime itself adopted the practice.<sup>78</sup>

By the same token, the first beneficiaries of travel discounts were commercial rather than cultural interests. In 1933, the review *Commercio Veneto* declared that the Exhibition of International Arts and its subsidiary festivals had attracted to Venice a sizeable public both from Italy and overseas, a success facilitated by the implementation of various fare reductions which had brought 'great advantage to commerce in general and hotel industry in particular'.<sup>79</sup> It was believed that many tourists were still content to take advantage of discounted train tickets without any intention of entering the exhibition itself.<sup>80</sup> Even when travellers were drawn inside the salons in order to validate their tickets, it was arguable that any emphasis on 'moral education' was a secondary consideration to 'commercial gains'.<sup>81</sup>

Yet, more doubt can be cast on the assertion that the adoption of mass tourism practices at the Biennale was part of a coordinated programme to target a wider class spectrum for propagandistic and ideological purposes.<sup>82</sup> The aim here is to demonstrate that Venetian Fascists were more interested in the economic possibilities offered by increased attendance than the incorporation of new social groups within the development of an identifiably Fascist national culture. This point is reinforced by the fact that the longevity of the Biennale and other major cultural

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<sup>77</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 97.

<sup>78</sup> A decree of 16 December 1923 granted railways facilities and customs exemptions in favour of fairs and exhibitions (ACS, Regio Decreto Legge n. 2740, 16 December 1923, 'Norme per la concessione di facilitazioni ferroviarie e doganali a favore di fiere ed esposizioni', Ministero della Cultura Popolare, busta n. 1547, 'Sovvenzioni 1931-1943', prot. 14/1/1067). On 14 September 1927, the Ministry of Finance had authorized train discounts of 30% from 1 to 27 October 1927 to visit the 'Exhibition of Home Furniture' organized by the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* in the French and German pavilions at the Biennale's *Giardini Castello* (ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 48, 'Pubblicità 1928'). Had the Biennale happened in 1927, instead of 1928, I would interpret the home furniture event as a pretext under which the regime attracted lower classes to the art exhibition as well. It was probably the case that the OND was temporarily using the Biennale's site; yet this surely had the result to familiarize the working class with the Biennale's environment.

<sup>79</sup> 'Venezia. Il programmema della XIX Biennale', *Commercio Veneto*, 22 October 1933.

<sup>80</sup> Claude Roger-Marx, 'L'art français à la Biennale de Venise', *Le Jour*, 25 August 1934.

<sup>81</sup> Giannotti, 'Ultimo giorno all'esposizione. Bilancio consuntivo di tre mesi di vita', *Il Gazzettino di Venezia*, 20 September 1942.

<sup>82</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, pp. 98-9.

events set up in Venice directly depended upon the length of the period in which the fare reductions subsidised by the central government in order to broaden attendance remained valid.<sup>83</sup> In 1926, for example, the reduced tickets were suspended due to an earlier decree of 6 April 1925 which forbade the involvement of the National Railway Administration in schemes of payment by travellers of subsidies to the organisational committees of conventions, exhibitions and celebrations. According to the Biennale administration, the temporary lack of such a vital concession had serious effects on the profits of the XV edition, even jeopardising the future of the event.<sup>84</sup>

In that sense, the travel reductions granted by the central government were not just facilities for tourists; they represented the cornerstone, the very existence of the Venetian cultural summer programme.<sup>85</sup> At times, they could be source of competition between the Biennale and other cultural events. On 13 February 1935, this led the local administration to criticise the state: the Podestà Mario Alverà complained to the Prefect that the decision made by the government to cut back fare discounts granted to travellers would have a dramatic effect upon the financial plan devised for the Titian Exhibition.<sup>86</sup> According to Alverà, the economic position of the Titian Exhibition had already been altered when the president of the Biennale had personally met the relevant minister in order to grant to the *Quarant'anni d'arte veneta* Exhibition at the Biennale Gardens an option of two months of travel discounts. It later proved possible to reach an agreement between the two executive committees over shares of fare reductions. Because the Titian Exhibition was 'responsible for enhancing tourist numbers',<sup>87</sup> the Podestà asked the Prefect to deal on his behalf with the central authority in order to keep fare reductions discounted by 50% for at least six more months, so as to avoid further financial damage to the

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<sup>83</sup> ASAC, Serie Segreteria/Arti Visive, 'Bollettino 1934-37'.

<sup>84</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 57, 'Promemoria'.

<sup>85</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbalì delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 28 January 1935. It is quite significant that for the *Settecento* Exhibition of 1929, profits obtained through discounted rail tickets made up 1/3 of the entire business. (ASAC, Serie Segreteria/Arti Visive, 'Mostra del Settecento Veneziano').

<sup>86</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 34, busta 'Riduzioni ferroviarie pel 1936-Riscossione quote dai viaggiatori'.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

local administration.<sup>88</sup>

Nevertheless, during the Biennale meeting of 31 July 1935, Volpi informed the committee that despite all attempts to boost the Exhibition *Quarant'anni d'arte Veneta*, it had proved a financial failure. According to Volpi, this was explained by three main factors: the low degree of interest shown by the public due to poor publicity before the event; the temporary lack of authorization of rail discounts from the government; and the simultaneous opening of the Titian Exhibition. Most seriously, Volpi argued, the town council had planned the Titian event without taking the possibility of competition with other Biennale celebrations into consideration.<sup>89</sup>

The Podestà then announced, for the benefit of the Minister of Communications, that 'the treatment meted out to Venice, considered the most important resort in Italy [was] pitifully only equal to that granted to minor resorts, and that vanishing travel discounts for tourists meant that Venice would be in a position of inferiority compared to other Italian cities'.<sup>90</sup> Clearly the Podestà criticized the state for not assisting Venice in the right way: once again we are confronted with competing local interests rather than an organic national system where all communities worked together with common aims. On a general level, these examples provide an illustration of the degree of involvement of tourist techniques in the success or failure of Biennale cultural events in Venice. Their commercial success was, quite simply, too important to be left to chance.

According to Giuliana Tomasella, the Biennale of International Arts in the 1930s recorded profits only in the edition of 1934 (a profit of 2,800,000 lire against an expense of 2,300,000 lire). In 1938, expenses had overtaken takings by one million lire, a remarkable sum indeed in those years. For Tomasella, the deficit sprang both from the decrease in the number of visitors (in 1938 they were at only half the 1934 levels), and from the impossibility of reaching an appropriate agreement with the Italian Railway Society.<sup>91</sup> Tomasella insists that most profits at

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 31 July 1935.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra*, p. 7.

the Biennale were produced from fare reductions and the impact of the so-called 'bollini ferroviari' (rail tickets to be punched at the Biennale gates) which had been a consistent feature of the exhibition until 1935, when, suddenly, a Royal Decree of 21 February arbitrarily decided that fare reductions would not last more than four months and would be re-established at 50%.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, Alverà complained that benefits originating from special travel reductions were affected by a curtailment of profits of 55% devolved as contributions to various national institutions. According to Alverà, discounts had been granted to all kinds of minor events, and other concessions for tourist groups and families had overlapped with those of the Biennale in such a way as to undermine the benefits received in Venice.<sup>93</sup> To understand the impact the decree had on the profits generated by travel reductions, it need only be noted that in 1934, they stood at 925,050 lire while in 1936, they had fallen dramatically to just 107,900 lire.<sup>94</sup>

In 1936, Volpi wrote to Dino Alfieri, Undersecretary of State for the Press and Propaganda informing him that the Biennale administration had decided to start the Music and Theatre festivals in 1930 'because travel discounts then granted by the national government would allow them to obtain remarkable profits from the sum produced from the purchase of return tickets'.<sup>95</sup> According to Volpi, it was thanks to this income and further contributions from the municipality that the festivals achieved importance, both in terms of 'artistic as well as tourist' success.<sup>96</sup> He also complained that since it had been decided that these profits were to be shared with the Provincial Tourist Agency, the decision to dispossess the Biennale of further sums in favour of the institutions of the regime would mean that the traditional benefits from the travel discounts would be reduced to virtual insignificance, and the Biennale would thus be deprived of one of its main economic sources. The lack of benefits deriving from train discounts were to have such lasting consequences, contributing to Volpi eventually threatening to abandon the festivals in the second half of the 1930s (see chapter 3). Moreover, for the same

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>93</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 5 February 1936.

<sup>94</sup> Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra*, p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, 'Riduzioni ferroviarie 1936'.

reason, Volpi remained adamant that there was no possibility of the Biennale administration paying its yearly contribution to the *Ente Provinciale per il Turismo*.<sup>97</sup>

Once again, it is revealed that travel, tourism and commerce represented the cornerstone for the life of the Biennale enterprise up to the point where their very existence was determined by their commercial potential. For this reason, it is difficult to conclude that the promotion of mass tourism at the Venice Biennale was driven primarily by ideological considerations. The new forms of publicity and the use of the festivals as tourist commodities point at an evident process of commercialisation of cultural contents. Fare reductions and other travel schemes were the direct product of the economic function fulfilled by the Biennale in order to revive tourism in the lagoon rather than representing an aspect of Fascist propaganda.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.



## Part Two: The enterprise

### 4.5 The Biennale within the international art market

In the 1930s, the function assigned to the Venice Biennale of generating additional revenue and boosting tourism was dramatically reinforced. Both the Biennale administration and the local council demanded that the institution perform a practical-commercial function alongside its aesthetic-cultural role. Thus, in 1932, Maraini declared in *La Rivista di Venezia*: 'There will come a day that people point at the institution as a centre regulating all the arts, where ideal and cultural possibilities join commercial interests'.<sup>98</sup> Volpi himself, from his usual entrepreneurial perspective, had at the beginning of the 1930s expressed the need to make the Biennale 'more appealing to the audience',<sup>99</sup> meaning that the latter should be encouraged to engage with the exhibition as consumers. It was certainly the case that in the 1930s, the Biennale administration hoped to take maximum advantage of the international art market. In a period of heavy economic recession, the sale of works of art displayed at the Biennale had become vital to the very existence of the institution (which retained 10-15% of the price of any works sold).<sup>100</sup>

In 1928, Maraini declared that sales constituted the life blood of the Biennale<sup>101</sup> and that they had always been more conspicuously important than in any other local exhibition. Nonetheless, it was recognised that the body suffered from its decidedly antiquated ways of dealing with potential customers. Maraini also believed that an obstacle to the improvement of sales revenue was a gap of two years between one exhibition and the other, in which the administration could easily lose contact with collectors who might otherwise become regular buyers.<sup>102</sup> To avoid this, it was suggested that Biennale executives consider the possibility of inviting representatives from the private sector to oversee sales right from the preparatory phases of the exhibition. A private body could boost profits by establishing close relationships with public institutions, municipal galleries, banks,

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Maraini, 'La XVIII Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte', *La Rivista di Venezia*, April 1932.

<sup>99</sup> ASAC, Serie Materiale da Riordinare, 'Ufficio Stampa-Amministrazione 1936'.

<sup>100</sup> ASAC, Serie Registri Vendite, 1930.

<sup>101</sup> Scotto Lavina, '1927, 1936', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia* 32, 82, p. 42.

companies and art collectors. In effect, the Biennale authorities were moving towards the acknowledgment of the importance of the private art market, and recognising that it was necessary to cooperate with the private domain in order to penetrate it.<sup>103</sup>

In 1932, Volpi again stressed the need to appoint to the sales office an expert accountable to the administration personnel.<sup>104</sup> Alverà claimed that it was vital to boost sales, but did warn the other members about moving from the complete lack of a 'mercantile spirit' that had hitherto characterized the Biennale to the opposite extreme. Volpi proposed to initiate a one year experiment: to exclude the percentage deriving from purchases made by officials and public bodies from the share earned by the sales officer. Maraini backed the idea as a means of improving private purchases against the public ones which had traditionally formed the majority of the transactions at the Biennale.<sup>105</sup>

In 1941, Maraini announced that the Milanese art expert, Ettore Gian Ferrari, had been appointed as the Head of the Biennale Sales Office. He owned a private gallery connected to 'excellent customers and art amateurs', and was known to have close contacts with many artists. According to Volpi, Gian Ferrari's salary could even be covered by the additional profits generated as a result of his appointment.<sup>106</sup> Tomasella thus notes that Gian Ferrari was appointed in order that the Biennale might take advantage of his contacts in the art world, and improve the exhibitions own disappointing sales record.<sup>107</sup> The decision to hire Ferrari was part of a strategy which ultimately aimed at dragging the Biennale, kicking and screaming if need be, into the international art market, in order to make its

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. At the committee meeting of 19 September 1930, Maraini had expressed his concern about falling sales caused by the general depression, and had suggested that a 'radical reform' of the sales office at the Biennale would be necessary in order to dramatically boost purchases. Maraini was of the opinion that a trained sales expert was needed; he believed that the contact between clerk and customer ought to be strong and continuous, and a constant connection could only be carried out by a real 'vendeur' who could maintain a business relationship with buyers. According to Volpi, a 'production agent' (*agente produttore*) would be required (ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. I, 27/02/1930-07/12/1931, session 5 September 1930).

<sup>104</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. II, 01/01/1932-06/07/1934, session 25 January 1932.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, vol. III, 28/01/1935-30/01/1943, session 12 May 1943.

contemporary art exhibitions less dependent on state support which up to that point had sustained it.<sup>108</sup> Once again, it needs to be stressed that conveying a political message to the Italian population through artistic representation was not as important as the commercialisation of culture and the profit-generating potential of the works on display.

During various committee meetings, Volpi had himself complained about the difficulty of finding private buyers for the works of art displayed at the Biennale, and the perception that purchases were being made almost exclusively by public agencies. The *quadro da cavalletto*, the common painting, he argued, had had its day, and it was therefore necessary to find alternative ways to attract the art lover, such as the decoration of panels as done in Japan, decorative prints, engravings for panels, etc.<sup>109</sup> The committee's intention was to organize future exhibitions in such ways as to cater for the tastes of the private art market. If the orthodox painting was *demodé*, then Volpi would prioritise new genres with greater commercial potential.<sup>110</sup> The Biennale authorities thus came to the conclusion that their primary task was the revitalization of the private market, since official purchases from Fascist bureaucrats and public administrations were generally 'satisfactory'.<sup>111</sup>

Once the Biennale was turned into a state body, the Fascist regime had started to finance it officially. However, another way for the government to inject funding was through state purchases of the works of art at the various exhibitions. According to Marla Stone,

'From 1930 until its collapse in 1943, the Fascist dictatorship consistently allocated funds for the purchase of paintings, drawings, and sculpture from the international, national, and regional exhibitions under its sponsorship. The organs of the party and the government

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<sup>107</sup> Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra*, p. 103.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 104.

<sup>109</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 10 May 1935.

<sup>110</sup> Clearly nobody took into account that in 1925 the Fascist journal *Le Arti Plastiche* (which read *Periodico della Corporazione Nazionale delle Arti Plastiche*) had warned that an artwork being the product of 'personal taste' or 'commercial intentions' could not be an expression or record of the moral heritage of a nation, thus it should have been readily eliminated. (Gino Severini, 'Biennali Veneziane', *Le Arti Plastiche*, 1 June 1925).

<sup>111</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 71.

made acquisitions at every Venice Biennale between 1930 and 1942 and widespread official buying was supplemented by significant purchasing by Fascist officials. Beginning in 1930, government and party purchases at the Venice Biennale remained fairly steady ranging between 25 and 32 percent of total sales and increased to 37 percent in the early 1940s. As an example, at the first Venice Biennale with major Fascist government and party presence, in 1930, overall sales amounted to 1,407,892 lire for 462 works of painting, sculpture and drawing. Government offices, local agencies, and party organizations together made purchases to the value of 291,700 lire. The largest official buyer, the Ministry of National Education, spent 130,000 lire on 35 paintings and sculpture destined for the Galleria d'arte moderna in Rome. The government was also represented by the Roman municipal administration, the Ministry of Corporations, and the Undersecretariat for the Fine Arts. The National Fascist Party, and some of its affiliated organizations, such as the National Fascist Confederation of Professionals and Artists, bought 54,000 lire worth of art'.<sup>112</sup>

Apparently, in doing so, the regime intended to assist the private market which had been in a state of financial crisis since the end of the war.<sup>113</sup> Nonetheless, alongside the growing level of state involvement, the private market was also starting to establish itself at the Biennale. In this light, the observation made by Volpi at a committee meeting in 1935 is significant. Noticing that sales figures in 1934 had failed to climb higher than at previous exhibitions, due to the economic crisis, he revealed that there existed a huge difference between official sale prices of works of art and final agreed prices which highlighted the importance of the bargaining process. Volpi also pointed to the changing nature of the acquisitions and the disappearance of the 'wealthy buyer'.<sup>114</sup> Instead, the trend at the Biennale was for an increasing number of purchases of less expensive works. What is striking is that Volpi underlined the desire of less affluent consumers to possess a work of art (interesting in itself from the social point of view but less desirable when it came to the diminution of the huge private fortunes of the richest collectors and patrons from the exhibition).<sup>115</sup> The Biennale authorities thus

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 72.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p. 71.

<sup>114</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 28 January 1935.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

detected a double-edged set of developments. On the one hand, there was the decline of ‘enlightened patronage’ and on the other ‘the simultaneous rise of the artwork of mass consumption’.<sup>116</sup>

What Volpi had grasped was one of the most important social processes of the first decades of the century –the democratisation of consumption, the expansion of the audience keen to buy art, and the resulting commercialisation and standardisation of cultural products to cater for this new market. This progression is also demonstrated through the statistical analysis of the Biennale sale registers (registri vendite) between 1926 and 1942 summarised in the table below:<sup>117</sup>

	<b>Public bodies*</b>	<b>Private buyers**</b>	<b>Over. sales</b>
1926	833,381	1,594,005	2,427,386
1928	/	/	/
1930	575,525	581,293	1,156,818
1932	703,495	267,750	971,245
1934	/	/	866,181
1936	/	/	912,500
1938	695,081	298,766	993,847
1940	/	/	/
1942	/	1,502,179	3,700,000+

\*: this category indicates expenditure of public bodies in lire

\*\*: this category indicates expenditure of private buyers in lire

If one examines the sales figures for 1926, the ‘private buyers’ category represented 70 individuals.<sup>118</sup> They spent altogether 1,594,005 lire while the rest of the buyers (public bodies) reached 833,381 lire.<sup>119</sup> We can thus conclude that, as early as 1926, a private art market had indeed developed, and that it was already larger than the market for public purchases. In February 1927, *La Gazzetta di*

<sup>116</sup> Scotto Lavina, ‘1927, 1936’, in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia* 32, 82, p. 58.

<sup>117</sup> ASAC, Serie Registri Vendite, 1926-42.

<sup>118</sup> From this figure are left out: public administrations, Fascist bureaucrats and institutions, galleries and museums, companies, societies and associations, banks, clubs, dignitaries and foreign ambassadors and other various collective bodies which form altogether the ‘public buyers’. The same distinction is operated by the Biennale Sales Registers (see for example sales registers of 1936).

*Venezia* announced:

‘The remarkable amount of money flowing to the Biennale testifies to the importance that Venice has reached within the international art market and the necessity, from the economic point of view, to defend its position (...). This signifies that the Venice Biennale is nowadays a national and international organism based on sound roots thanks to the perfect organisation of the artistic and administrative direction of the enterprise’.<sup>120</sup>

In 1928, the private market comprised 87 individuals. Unfortunately, sales figures for the XVI Biennale and an overall evaluation for that year are not available. Nonetheless, Maraini wrote to the Prefect of Venice bemoaning the fact that the ‘true art lover’ was missing from the XVI edition, leaving room for a kind of buyer less keen on spending the same amounts. Moreover, the number of works by very young artists on display produced the contraction of a market which had hitherto tended to favour more established artists.<sup>121</sup> This could well explain why, in the following editions, the Biennale deliberately courted the ‘big names’ of the art world. In 1928, Maraini had acknowledged some criticism of the catalogue, with the exhibition accused of being too *avant-garde* and neglecting more traditional forms of art. It contained two different sections of the same importance: one was devoted to the ‘Novecento’ movement, one to the art of the ‘Ottocento’, with famous painters and internationally recognised *maestri*. In particular, the ‘Ottocento’ artists had received an invitation permitting them to display at the Biennale whatever they liked, in the belief that the popularity of the traditional Ottocento style meant that almost all works would find buyers relatively easily.<sup>122</sup> Maraini also informed foreign representatives of the ‘huge financial success’ of the XVI Biennale, and noted that many of the purchases were made within foreign pavilions by Italian galleries and private buyers.<sup>123</sup>

In 1930, the private art market had dramatically shrunk to a figure of 581,293 lire, significantly lower than that of 1926. Nonetheless, the number of

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<sup>119</sup> ASAC, Serie Registri Vendite, 1926.

<sup>120</sup> *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 18 February 1927.

<sup>121</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, ‘Pubblicità 1928’.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

private buyers at the XVII Biennale had reached around 107 individuals reinforcing Volpi's conclusions about the changing nature of the art market. The overall figure for the public sector remained roughly the same at around 575,525 lire.<sup>124</sup> In 1932, the onset of the global depression hit the art market, and purchases only reached around 267,750 lire. There were still over 100 buyers, but they were not prepared to spend anything like as much as in previous years. A totally inverted trend is revealed if one examines the figures for the public market where purchases stood at 703,495 lire that year.<sup>125</sup> Recession hindered arts consumption after 1933. Yet, the government continued to buy art and this encouraged more spending. Government and party purchases increased at the 1932 Biennale.<sup>126</sup>

The changing climate certainly contributed to the decision in the 1930s to open the doors of the Biennale to the decorative arts, amongst the crafts most closely associated with the Venetian tradition (see section 4.10). Decorative objects were less expensive and therefore more appealing to the wider, less wealthy public identified by the administration. Moreover, the 'artists' producing this 'merchandise' were often merely specialised national or foreign handicraft companies producing unique or limited edition pieces.<sup>127</sup> This reinforces the thesis that the Venice Biennale in the 1930s came to heavily emphasise its commercial outlook.

The pavilion of decorative arts was successful in boosting sales which totalled 866,181 lire in 1934.<sup>128</sup> In 1936, sales were up to 912,500 lire for 511 works of art, although unfortunately figures for private and public purchases are not available. Nonetheless, we do know that out of 511 pieces, 229 were paintings, 53 were sculptures, 145 were drawings and engravings, and 84 were decorative objects.<sup>129</sup> This meant that despite the ongoing economic depression, the private art market still focused upon the 'real' work of art, the traditional painting, rather than modern glassware and decorative objects. Again in 1938, public purchases, with about 695,081 lire worth of sales, came to sustain those from private buyers which

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<sup>124</sup> ASAC, Serie Registri Vendite, 1930.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 1932.

<sup>126</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 73.

<sup>127</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, 'Elenco ditte da invitare per la mostra del vetro'.

<sup>128</sup> ASAC, Serie Registri Vendite, 1934.

were up to 298,766 lire.<sup>130</sup> If we compare private purchases in 1934 and 1938, it is clear that the private art market was maintaining itself at a consistent level, somewhat surprising given the economic conditions and the deteriorating international political climate.

Despite Maraini's complaints that sales had not been satisfactory, it is striking that he did not blame the economic situation or the unwillingness of the art market so much as logistical problems (he argued that the public was neglecting the exhibition because the central government had not granted its usual travel discounts).<sup>131</sup> Overall sales had still totalled around 993,847 lire, and the Biennale administration revealed that they could have reached 1,132,630 lire if only transactions had remained in line with the original selling prices.<sup>132</sup> Again, this indicates that, in a time of crisis, artists were ready to come to terms with buyers in order to sell their works. Moreover, the share that the Biennale retained as a percentage on sales went up to 15%, a sign, either that the art market was further developing, or that the Biennale was increasingly looking to the economic return it could draw from sales as the solution to the financial situation of the institution.

In 1940, 403 artworks were sold for a little more than one million lire. What is striking is that just 24% of purchases were made by a very small number of private buyers. The rest was shared among various state bodies such as the Ministers of National Education, of Popular Culture, of Communications, of Agriculture, of Foreign Affairs, the municipalities of Venice, Naples, Genoa and Florence, civic museums, Fascist confederations and provincial administrations.<sup>133</sup>

The Biennale of 1942 was the last to be held before the end of the war. As we analyse figures of transactions, it is clear that purchases from Fascist institutions had dramatically fallen, while the private art market had showed a correspondingly impressive rise. Overall sales marked a peak of more than 3,700,000 lire for about 800 works of art (an increase of 100%), and the private sector had spent an

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 1936.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 1938.

<sup>131</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 24 March 1938.

<sup>132</sup> ASAC, Serie Registri Vendite, 1938.

<sup>133</sup> Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra*, p. 80.



astonishing 1,502,179 lire.<sup>134</sup> These statistics further reinforces the thesis of a development of a private art market separate from Fascist influence and state patronage. The respectable review *Domus* declared that results of this kind were unprecedented, surpassing even those in the boom year of 1920 when sales had reached an enormous two and a half million lire. Most remarkable was that 90 per cent of buyers were from the private sector, spontaneously choosing and acquiring for their own sake, not to support artists or to make patronage but to possess works of art they desired (notwithstanding the wartime situation).<sup>135</sup> Buyers included famous collectors such as Falck, Della Ragione, Jucker, Astaldi, Stramezzi, Marinotti, plus, naturally, Volpi and Cini. The impressive results were certainly due to the appointment of gallery owner Gian Ferrari at the Biennale sales office.<sup>136</sup>

Despite the war, private buyers continued to pump money into the art market at the Biennale. Maraini declared that success of the exhibition was complete in 1942, and praise came from the press as well as the art critics, but the unprecedented level of sales could be interpreted as indicative of recognition granted by the public.<sup>137</sup> Again Maraini bemoaned the lack of travel discounts, but he was pleased to see that the audience participating at the Biennale did include 'refined, cultured buyers, real art lovers'.<sup>138</sup> In the face of the economic situation, claimed the official, the share earned by the Biennale had been highly satisfactory, and he could conclude that sales were 'the cornerstone of the success of the 1942 edition'. For the central government, keeping the exhibition alive during wartime served political purposes, while for the Biennale entourage, what mattered was the economic return granted by sales.<sup>139</sup>

#### 4.6 Competitions with Fascist themes

The fact that the Exhibition of International Arts aimed at serving a tourist project rather than an exclusively aesthetic one does not mean that the institution

<sup>134</sup> ASAC, Serie Registri Vendite, 1942.

<sup>135</sup> Maraini, 'Nota sulla XXIII Biennale', *Domus*, October 1942.

<sup>136</sup> Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra*, p. 104.

<sup>137</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 30 January 1943.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, session 24 March 1938.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*.

was free from ideological content or that it was not subject to Fascist influence and policies. As pointed out before, for the regime, cultural events and naturally the Biennale were indeed considered as agents of mass mobilisation. In 1930, the state decided to take its programme of nationalization even further. Following the recognition of the *Ente Autonomo Biennale*, the Administrative Committee introduced official competitions with Fascist themes, open to all Italian artists who were members of the Fascist syndicates, alongside the regular schedule. These were to establish themselves as a mainstay of the exhibition's cultural landscape and were credited, if only by the most doctrinaire officials, as finally bringing about the creation of a specifically Fascist aesthetic. *La Gazzetta di Venezia* wrote that the competitions had been instituted in order to bring back real art, which had been hitherto 'disoriented by abstraction, away from the subjects of real life'.<sup>140</sup> Maraini wished to 'reinstate consensus, a tie of agreement, an exchange of sentiments and ideas between the domain of arts and the people'.<sup>141</sup> According to the *Rivista di Venezia*, Maraini had inaugurated those competitions in order to make the Biennale the necessary mediator between the Fascist Revolution and artists, 'who need[ed] to live and operate within their time'.<sup>142</sup> In reality, after the system of selection had changed, prizes had been established to give a chance to those young artists who had not been officially invited.<sup>143</sup>

Sponsors included the Minister of National Education, the PNF, the Venetian municipality, various Confederations, private associations and citizens. The awards ceremony took place in the *Palazzo dell'Esposizione*, beginning in September 1930, and the works of art were displayed within the Central Pavilion.<sup>144</sup> The jury of the competitions included Volpi, Giuseppe Bottai (Minister of the Corporations), Giacomo Di Giacomo (President of the National Confederation of the Fascist Syndicates of Professionists and Artists), Cipriano Efisio Oppo (Secretary General of the Syndicates of Fine Arts), Roberto Forges Davanzati (President of the Society of Authors and Editors), Carlo Basile (representing the

<sup>140</sup> *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 'Riduzioni ferroviarie per la XVII Biennale', 13 April 1930.

<sup>141</sup> Maraini, 'Finalità Sociali dei Premi alla XVII Biennale', *Politica Sociale*, August 1930.

<sup>142</sup> Zorzi, 'Le vicende dei premi alla Biennale dal 1895 al 1930', *La Rivista di Venezia*, 1930.

<sup>143</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbalì delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. I, 27/02/30–07/12/31, session 7 December 1931.

PNF), Margherita Sarfatti, Ugo Ojetto and, naturally, Antonio Maraini himself.<sup>145</sup> According to the report written by the committee, the variety and generosity of the prizes offered by the sponsors were unprecedented in Europe. There were 250 participants for nineteen prizes worth 331,000 lire.<sup>146</sup> Because of this, on the committee meeting of 5 September 1930, Volpi suggested that the Biennale administration retained a share of 10 percent upon the amount of the prizes. Maraini was rather less keen, explaining that prizes were instituted only upon completion of the official purchases from which the Biennale itself profited.<sup>147</sup>

According to Stone, Fascist competitions at the Biennale proved a failure. The majority of the works presented were deficient in either style or technique, and many of the allotted prizes were in fact never awarded.<sup>148</sup> Others were assigned more because of the effort rather than the talent of the artists. Instead, competitions for the Goldsmiths' Hall suffered from a problem of having too many competitors and participants. The press generally agreed that competitions were unsuccessful, above all because of the lack of enthusiasm shown by the entrants themselves.<sup>149</sup>

The cultural bureaucrat Arturo Lancellotti, in an article revealingly titled 'The failure of the prize competitions', wrote: 'It was painful to think that such a paramount national event would not find an artist able to tackle it with the appropriate degree of passion and intensity (...). These competitions gave birth to so many pictorial horrors.(...) Paintings were frightening for their sheer scale. (...) Not even Maraini, with his resources, could make the miracle happen (...). We must agree upon their failure'.<sup>150</sup>

In 1932, under the pretext of celebrating the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome, Maraini promoted the usual competitions which once again disappointed juries who noted the lack of enthusiasm shown by artists.<sup>151</sup> It is sufficient to observe that in many cases, the competitions, as in 1930, had to resort to awards

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<sup>144</sup> *Belvedere*, 15 June 1929.

<sup>145</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 276.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>147</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. I, 27/02/30–07/12/31, session 5 September 1930.

<sup>148</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 83.

<sup>149</sup> Arturo Lancellotti, 'La XVII Biennale Veneziana', *La Rivista di Venezia*, October 1930.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 82.

being made ~~not~~ to the least bad entrant. A similar trend was maintained throughout the 1930s –low levels of participation and less interest. Similar experiments introduced at the ‘Premio Cremona’ in 1939 by more doctrinaire officials such as Roberto Farinacci also attracted very few suitable applicants.<sup>152</sup> According to Stone, artists refused to take part in those specific events because they could rely on alternative rewards from the state, such as direct purchases or benefits from the syndical system.<sup>153</sup>

The Fascist regime started to act as patron at the Biennale at the beginning of the 1930s, exactly when the fostering of the burgeoning private market became a priority.<sup>154</sup> We have already seen how Volpi’s strategy of targeting a wider audience of cultural consumers culminated with the tremendous success of the Venetian summer tourist seasons and increasing attendance levels at the Biennale’s events. This had the positive effect of expanding the private art sector, and those artists who could not break into the market of expensive paintings could turn instead to the decorative arts, more affordable to a middle-class public. The paradox is that Fascism, in promoting mass attendance, actually created the conditions which allowed artists to enter the private market, and to rely on economic sources other than those granted by the state. By widening consumer base, the regime actually produced the failure of the prize competitions (at least in terms of their role in constructing consent). The Biennale, by accepting cultural compromise and diversification in fact served to prevent the development of a defined Fascist aesthetic.

Artists at the Biennale were sometimes willing to accept Fascist patronage when this did not require an overt political commitment. It seems that they were willing to contribute to Fascist art (i.e. work sponsored by Fascist institutions or patrons), but were deeply reluctant to produce a ‘fascistized’ art (i.e. work openly depicting Fascist themes and images). The latter was generally perceived to be an unacceptable compromise of artistic integrity, and artists preferred to renounce the

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, p. 186.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, p. 85.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, p. 71.

prizes on offer in order to preserve their creative freedoms.<sup>155</sup> It is interesting to note that a similar judgement was reached by Lancellotti who observed: 'Despite the monetary appeal of the prizes, the majority of the artists have followed their own path, painting and sculpting whatever they had in mind; instead, a small part, pushed by economic constraints, have come to terms with their conscience and have attempted to try their luck with the prizes, with poor results'.<sup>156</sup> At the same time, Maraini prophetically complained that artists were more and more detached from the national problems, 'paying attention to technical and theoretical questions comprehensible only by specialists',<sup>157</sup> or 'using a language for elitist circles characterized by an arrogant exclusivism'.<sup>158</sup>

On a broader level, it is fair to say that, as well as state patronage, artists could now draw upon the developing private market which constituted an 'impersonal' patron which did not require any political commitment.<sup>159</sup> According to the general theory of Pierre Bourdieu, confronted with a private audience, artists had more chance to produce an art for art's sake, and tended to become more and more autonomous from the requirements of an official patron (in this case the Fascist state) and the academic system. The 'constant growth of a public of potential consumers' guaranteed the producers of works of art a minimum level of 'economic independence'. As a result, cultural producers were thus 'increasingly in a position to liberate their products from external constraints, whether the moral censure and aesthetic programmes of a proselytizing church or the academic controls and directives of political power, inclined to regard art as an instrument of propaganda'.<sup>160</sup> This process ran parallel 'with the constitution of a socially distinguishable category of professional artists who [were] less prone to recognize

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<sup>155</sup> There was the case of artists who ventured negotiation. For instance, on 6 June 1935, the Direzione Generale degli Italiani all'Estero, a section of the Minister of Foreign Affairs complained with Domenico Varagnolo and the Biennale which had acted as mediator in a transaction. The Direzione had commissioned a bust of the Duce to be placed at the Italian embassy in Bruxelles. Sculptor Ruffini had claimed 2,000 lire for his work, while for an eventual second copy, the Direzione complained, he would ask for an extra 500 lire, and so forth for any additional sculpture (ASAC, Serie Segreteria/Arti Visive, 'Risposte di artisti 1935').

<sup>156</sup> Lancellotti, 'La XVII Biennale Veneziana'.

<sup>157</sup> Maraini, 'Finalità Sociali'.

<sup>158</sup> Ibidem, 'Biennale di conciliazione', *Le Tre Venezie*, April 1930.

<sup>159</sup> Bourdieu has analysed the field of cultural production at a general level. It is my aim here to apply the analysis to the case of the Biennale of International Arts.

rules other than the specifically intellectual or artistic traditions handed down by their predecessors'. The more autonomous cultural producers became, the more they tended to condemn privilege, worldly acclaim and even the institutionalised forms of cultural authority (the absence of any academic status or position might even be considered a virtue).<sup>161</sup>

By 1943, both Maraini and Volpi had accepted that the 'Fascist Revolution' had had its day. Even so, the main reasons for that year's decision to cancel the 'Fascist' competitions were of an economic nature. Besides producing disappointing artistic results, they had incurred significant administrative expenses upon the Biennale authorities and, as Volpi pointed out, young artists had the chance to make themselves known through the competitions at the numerous syndical exhibitions arranged every year.<sup>162</sup>

This section has demonstrated that the forging of a definite Fascist aesthetic was not possible at the Biennales of the 1930s. The progressive development of a private art market worked to thwart any advancement towards the fascistization of the cultural exhibits on display at the competitions, as emerging artists had the chance to sell their works to the wider public rather than to Fascist institutions. This, combined with the burden of growing administrative costs, persuaded the Biennale organisers to abandon the goal of a Fascistized art in favour of cultural diversification.

#### **4.7 'Aesthetic pluralism' as a marketing strategy**

Purchases in the 1930s were made by a range of Fascist organisations and groups including the Fascist Confederation of Agricultural Syndicates and the National Fascist Confederation of Professionals and Artists.<sup>163</sup> Stone has argued that in these cases 'aesthetic pluralism'<sup>164</sup> remained the defining feature of state

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<sup>160</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 112-13.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, p. 116.

<sup>162</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 30 January 1943.

<sup>163</sup> ASAC, Serie Registri Vendite, 1930-38.

<sup>164</sup> Aesthetic pluralism is considered by Stone as the practice endorsed by the state of supporting different art trends with no particular exclusion, as long as they were not overtly anti-Fascist (Stone, *The Patron State*, pp. 65-70).

patronage, a factor which necessarily tended to promote a far greater degree of 'liberalism' in the art field than was the case in Nazi Germany.<sup>165</sup> Government and party, playing an active role in the art market, purchased works without conforming to any narrowly defined aesthetic doctrine. Admittedly, state purchases between 1930 and 1935 did markedly favour Italian artists, particularly those associated with the 'Novecento' movement, but the work of Futurists, members of the Italian 'return to order', Tuscan naturalists, *Strapaese* artists<sup>166</sup> and abstract painters were by no means 'off limits' to state buyers.<sup>167</sup>

Stone, looking at the example of the 1934 Biennale, insists that 'the works bought failed to show bias towards a particular aesthetic school'.<sup>168</sup> The 'Novecento' movement and the Futurists were both represented on party and government acquisition lists (and Stone draws attention to works by Achille Funi, Felice Carena, Tato, and Enrico Prampolini in particular). She does not detect any major distinction between party and government acquisitions policies, noting that 'all the prominent schools from the Futurists through the Metaphysicals found government and party purchasers'.<sup>169</sup> In addition, purchases of overtly political works were not common in what Stone terms the 'middle years of Fascist patronage' and, as a result, she is able to conclude that, in buying significant quantities of exhibited art drawn from a wide range of schools and movements, the regime was demonstrating its commitment to an aesthetically pluralist culture.<sup>170</sup>

For Stone, 'aesthetic pluralism' was a constant policy of the Fascist state when buying art at the Biennale. However, it might well be argued that the practice of choosing a range of styles and genres was not imposed on the institution by the state as Stone holds<sup>171</sup>, but was instead the product of the institution's own 'liberal' cultural politics. This entailed a carefully considered decision on the part of the Biennale administrative board to invite different schools in order to cater for the varying tastes of a 'broad range of potential buyers. As was noted earlier in this

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<sup>165</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 77.

<sup>166</sup> Pictorial style with references to ruralism and rustic values.

<sup>167</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 73.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

chapter, Volpi and Maraini's chief concern was to stimulate the private market. Several artworks had been acquired by the different ministries, the PNF and Fascist bureaucrats, and the Venetian municipality mainly from 1930 onwards. Therefore, the biggest contribution to the Biennale before 1930 had come from the private art market, a niche that could be further exploited. For this reason, it was vital that the Biennale did not discriminate against any particular style for fear of restricting the market. During the committee meeting of 28 January 1935, Volpi reminded the audience that the 'credo' of the Biennale had remained unchanged since its foundation in 1895; it accepted 'any inspiration or technique but refused any form of vulgarity'. The Biennale, argued Volpi (somewhat cynically), stayed faithful to its principles regardless of any change of persons or norms.<sup>172</sup>

By studying the sales registers between 1926 and 1942, it is possible to establish that there existed a group of private buyers who had shown constant interest in specific genres throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s. In this light, it had become relatively easy for Maraini and the Biennale executives to predict the audience's tastes and prepare future exhibitions accordingly. What Marla Stone labels 'aesthetic pluralism' might therefore be said to have been part of the Biennale's own 'marketing strategy' rather than any real desire to conform to a specific Fascist policy in the cultural domain.

The Biennale sales records can help to identify those patrons who had consistently purchased art at the exhibition in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>173</sup> One notable

<sup>172</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 28 January 1935.

<sup>173</sup> The table below draws from the Biennale sales registers and summarizes some of the purchases at the Biennale between 1926 and 1942:

	1926	1928	1930	1932	1934	1936	1938	1940	1942
P. Stramezzi						*	*	*	*
A. Zamorani					*	*	*	*	*
E. Zorzi		*	*	*		*	*		
C. Giussani	*		*		*			*	
I. Montesi		*	*		*			*	
S. Stravopolous				*	*		*		
G. Baradel				*	*	*		*	
V. Cini			*	*	*	*	*	*	*
A. Gaggia			*	*	*	*	*	*	*
A. Orvieto	*	*		*	*				
P. Ingegnoli	*		*	*					
G. Errera		*	*	*	*	*	*		



trend was that of how the majority of the buyers mentioned favoured decorative rather than figurative arts. It was probably this that prompted the opening of a specialized pavilion in 1934, more than any perception of a need to enlarge the range of traditional cultural offerings at the Biennale.

Again, aesthetic diversification served the purpose of satisfying the tastes of those loyal patrons who were regularly buying at every edition of the showcase. These initial conclusions are supported if one looks at the growing desire of the Biennale administration to establish control over what was exhibited at the various pavilions. In the 1930s, the decision to select particular works of art for the Biennale, rather than offering general invitations to artists, resulted from an awareness of the need to monitor the content of the pavilion displays, and to

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P. Ghislanzoni			*			*			*
T. De Marinis	*			*		*			
P. di Valmarana			*		*	*			
E. Amonn			*			*			*
Z. Roncoroni			*			*	*	*	
G. B. del Vò	*	*	*						
P.G. Kennedy		*	*	*					
G. Venini		*			*		*		

\*: indicates purchases of the same kind of art made by the patrons at the different editions of the Biennale

As shown above, Paolo Stramezzi was fond of oil paintings, and regularly bought works by Louis Buisseret at the Biennale editions of 1936, 1938, 1940 and 1942. Engineer Arrigo Zamorani shared his passion for art between oil paintings and fine glassware: he intervened as a buyer at every Biennale between 1934 and 1942. Venetian Count Elio Zorzi exclusively purchased glassware at every edition between 1928 and 1938, except for 1934. A love of fine glassware also influenced the purchasing of Camillo Giussani in 1926, 1930, 1934 and 1940. Ilario Montesi, too, had a penchant for decorative arts, buying crystal and glassware in 1928, 1930, 1934 and 1940. The name of Greek patron S. Stravopolous was marked in the sales registers of 1932, 1934, 1938 and 1942, while Giulio Baradel revealed his fondness of decorative arts at the editions of 1932, 1934, 1936 and 1940. Venetian entrepreneurs Achille Gaggia and Vittorio Cini acted as generous patrons at every Biennale in the 1930s and early 1940s, possibly explained by their business partnership with president Volpi. Adolfo Orvieto purchased art in 1926, 1928, 1932 and 1934, while Paolo Ingegnoli was active in 1928, 1930 and 1932. G. Errera and his spouse regularly purchased at every Biennale between 1928 and 1938. Paolo Ghislanzoni expressed his own preference for decorative arts, especially plates and pots, at the editions of 1930, 1936 and 1940. Tamaro De Marinis specialised in the buying of watercolours at the Biennale of 1928, 1934 and 1938. As for Countess Pia di Valmarana, she concentrated on purchasing textiles in 1932, 1934 and 1936. Eric Amonn bought oil paintings in 1932, 1936 and 1942, while Zaira Roncoroni focused on lithographies in 1932, 1936, 1938 and 1940. G.B. Del Vò acted as patron in 1926, 1928 and 1930, P.G. Kennedy in 1928, 1930 and 1932, and glassware producer G. Venini in 1928, 1934 and 1940 (ASAC, Serie Registri Vendite, 1926-42). According to Tomasella, Engineer Sante Astaldi, famous art collector, had developed his own taste, acquiring at the Biennale 'omogeneous nucleus of artworks'. In 1943, he had revealed the usual distinctive choices by purchasing 'Nudo di giovane donna' from Cantatore, 'Fiori' from Tomea, 'Adolescente' from Gentilini, and 'Sogno di Zeno' from Birolli. (Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra*, p. 104).

guarantee a greater level of diversity in the presentation of the material.<sup>174</sup>

The importance of avoiding discrimination against any school or style had been established as a cornerstone of the Biennale's cultural politics. On 5 May 1930, Volpi explained how his preoccupations were concerned above all with the desire to ensure that the exhibition of fine arts be successful among the public. For this reason, he believed the executive committee could not remain detached from the Biennale's sales policy. Volpi also demonstrated his intention to maintain a liaison with the Patriarch in order to avoid any possibility that Catholics might be forbidden from visiting the exhibition.<sup>175</sup> On 3 October 1933, the Podestà questioned Maraini over the nature of the forthcoming Biennale, and he responded that the exhibition wished to host 'those balanced and mature art manifestations rather than experimental works'.<sup>176</sup> Certainly, Maraini intended to welcome more commercial art trends that could attract a wider range of buyers, broadening the exhibition's appeal beyond artistic elites and the *avant-garde*. As pointed out before, this approach did not emerge in the 1930s, but it was reinforced during that decade with Volpi at the head of the Biennale, determined to meet precise economic requirements and commercial priorities.<sup>177</sup>

To conclude, the fact that aesthetic diversification was allowed at the Biennales, not only exposes the limits of the supposedly totalitarian state when managing culture, it also reveals that cultural policies were not invariably imposed from above but could spring from below (if we consider the Biennale as a body steeped in regionalism and local traditions), from the internal mercantile 'ethics' of cultural enterprises. Major strategies and events within the life of the cosmopolitan

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<sup>174</sup> Maraini, 'Nota sulla XXIII Biennale'.

<sup>175</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. I, 27/02/30-07/12/31, session 5 May 1930.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, session 3 October 1933.

<sup>177</sup> After all, as early as 1928, the Biennale executive committee had made clear that foreign artists invited to the exhibition were those 'most representative of modern art in every country'. Artists such as Picasso, Van Dongen, Matisse, Dobson and Fajta –Maraini insisted– could surely fall in that category. According to the Biennale administration, the XVI edition of the exhibition was arranged to praise 'the best living artists' (ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, 'Pubblicità 1928'). On 13 May 1928, the review *Il Giornale dell'Arte*, declared about the XVI Biennale that a good exhibition should have been like 'a beautiful banquet where all the tastes and flavours were represented'. The Biennale should have not backed just one trend, also as a way to avoid monotony and repetition (Raoul Viviani, 'L'inaugurazione della XVI Biennale di Venezia', *Il Giornale dell'Arte*, 13 May 1928).

art exhibition were determined by the simple imperative of ‘making money’, and aesthetic choices were influenced by commercial factors far more than the construction of a Fascist art.

#### 4.8 Ideas for reforms at the Biennale

It is striking to observe that, despite the statement of Mayor Giordano back in 1922, who commented that the Biennale of International Arts ‘[was] not intended to be a market’ and that, therefore, it had opted not to bring in ‘commercial works of art’,<sup>178</sup> in reality, boosting sales, especially those of Venetian artists, counted more than anything else. As early as 1920, the secretary general Pica, had been put under the surveillance of a *Consiglio Direttivo* appointed by Giordano to keep in check his penchant for avant-garde art. According to Elio Zorzi, Giordano, in doing so, had been pressurized by the traditional Venetian artistic *milieus* who feared they could not compete with modernism and might loose business.<sup>179</sup>

In order to stimulate sales, Maraini, in 1928, had even begun to send letters to the Podestàs of Bologna, Naples, Palermo, and Rome urging them to buy artworks on behalf of their town galleries.<sup>180</sup> This drive was also responsible for changing the system of invitations operating up to 1930, when Maraini proposed a radical reform of selecting procedures. Prior to that date, artists invited to exhibit were free to display whatever works they wished, thereafter, Maraini and Volpi decided to issue single invitations to a specific work of art rather than to the artist himself.<sup>181</sup> According to Maraini, there were artists to whom you could assign a space to exhibit ‘with blind eyes’, and others who needed to have their works of art

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<sup>178</sup> AMV, Affari Generali del Comune di Venezia, quinquennio 1921-25, fascicolo XI/7/XX, ‘Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d’Arte’.

<sup>179</sup> Scotto Lavina, ‘1927, 1936’, in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *La Biennale di Venezia*, p. 37. In 1925, the journal *L’Eco del Piave* had declared that the Biennale had become ‘a wealthy fair of mediocrity’ (Frank Zasso, ‘I creatori della Biennale Veneziana contro il suo snaturamento’, *L’Eco del Piave*, 3 May 1925), and the *Gazzetta di Venezia* reported that the journal *Le Arti Plastiche*, ‘a well informed review’, had written about the ‘increasing commercial spirit of the Venice Biennale’ (*La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 5 December 1925).

<sup>180</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, ‘Pubblicità 1928’.

<sup>181</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 18 April 1935.

revised before being presented.<sup>182</sup> One year later, Maraini had proposed to divide invitations into two different categories: one to be issued to the artist, and one to be directed to the work of art. The first group included those individuals who, undoubtedly deserved a place at the Biennale; the second included ‘those who still struggle[d] for recognition’.<sup>183</sup> In 1928, Maraini and other committee members wrote to Volpi that ‘only a proper system of invitations [could] allow the Biennale to represent all the trends of modern art, especially the most notorious’.<sup>184</sup> Soon afterwards, Maraini and Volpi announced that future Biennales would be based upon invitations to a select group of major artists organised in key individual exhibitions. In other words, they intended to limit the number of invitations to artists of established fame while specific artworks could be selected to represent the work of less well-known participants.<sup>185</sup>

Admission by invitation represented, according to Maraini, a way to create exhibitions which could ‘communicate with the public and that the public understood’, and this was one of many innovations which had to be introduced ‘to make a useful contribution to the Biennale, the city of Venice and to the arts in general’.<sup>186</sup> Eventually, in 1932, Maraini, during a committee meeting, reminded his audience that occasionally the Biennale administration reserved the right to modify its charter, in which case artists might only be entitled to exhibit if they had been formally invited, a policy that served to distinguish the Venice Biennale from the Roman Quadriennale. Such a system, Maraini argued, would also mean significant savings of money and work, as much of the job of examining the works of art would be avoided.<sup>187</sup> Additionally, under article 10 of the charter, it was decided that no invitation could be issued to those applicants that had not participated in the Biennale at least once before.<sup>188</sup> This was done to avoid unwanted approaches from lesser known artists, and could also be used to ensure

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid, session 25 May 1935.

<sup>183</sup> ASAC, Verbale delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d’Arte, sedute 10-11-12 May 1927

<sup>184</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, ‘Pubblicità 1928’.

<sup>185</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Ente Biennale, vol. I, 27/02/30-07/12/31, session 25 October 1930.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid, vol. II, 01/01/32-06/07/34, session 15 November 1932.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, vol. I, 27/02/30-07/12/31, session 27 February 1930.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

that artists who had been unsuccessful in the past could be excluded.<sup>189</sup>

Biennale administrators justified their decisions with reference to the need to constantly rethink and reform internal rules about invitations, juries, competitions and prizes, so as to stay in touch with the most recent trends and tastes.<sup>190</sup> In reality, the most important priority was to limit the exhibition to 'acknowledged' works, most likely to generate sales.<sup>191</sup> Maraini declared in 1932 that the change was in response to the desire to associate Venice with 'an artistic elite drawn from the highest levels of the most beautiful aesthetic periods'.<sup>192</sup> As early as 1927, Nino Barbantini had suggested limiting the number of invitations to foreign participants who lived in Italy, and especially Venice. The previous year, Barbantini had observed that the only foreign artist invited to the exhibition outside his pavilion was Mariano Fortuny, and he was 'practically considered as a Venetian'.<sup>193</sup> Not surprisingly, art critic Lionello Venturi had declared in the Milanese review *Belvedere* that the Venice Biennale had always been 'a comfortable cushion for the great masters of the Lagoon', meaning that the institution preferred to host safe, unchallenging commercial art rather than *avant-garde* trends.<sup>194</sup> As a result of such conservatism, more radical artists had never been called to the Biennale<sup>195</sup> (in spite of Margherita Sarfatti's demand that 'the invitation granted to the artist should only be related to the talent of the latter').<sup>196</sup>

The idea of organising major retrospectives exhibiting the works of

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<sup>189</sup> As mentioned before, the Biennale in the 1930s was feeding a growing conservatism in the art field. In 1932, *Il Giornale d'Italia* declared: 'There are no revelations at the XVIII Biennale! Every personal exhibition bears the 'declaration of paternity': names like Carrà, Carena, Martini, Dazzi, Kisling. As at important meals, one suddenly knows the brand of the wine and food. Portraits, landscapes and still lives without effort of research (...). It is not with the approval of few groups that one pushes forward an institution which proves very expensive, and needs to enlarge its entourage beyond the restricted areas of the initiated and the snobs. Those who were excluded by this system are convinced that the system should serve art and not the opposite'. (Carlo Tridenti, 'Gli artisti Italiani e stranieri alla Biennale di Venezia che sarà solennemente inaugurata domani dal Re e dalla Regina', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 28 April 1932).

<sup>190</sup> Maraini, 'Nota sulla XXIII Biennale'.

<sup>191</sup> Tomasella has noticed that the majority of artists represented at the Biennale had always been the Venetian ones, as to favour the local art market (Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra*, p. 31).

<sup>192</sup> 'Alla Biennale di Venezia. Mostre individuali e collettive', *Il Regime Fascista*, 3 May 1932.

<sup>193</sup> Lionello Venturi, 'Venezia XVII', *Belvedere*, anno II, n. 5-6, May-June 1930.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Gino Pancheri, 'La XXII Biennale Internazionale di Venezia. Gli artisti stranieri in Brennero', *Il Piccolo*, 2 June 1940.

<sup>196</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, 'Pubblicità 1928'.

internationally renowned artists was born of the same spirit of commercial enterprise. During one Biennale committee meeting, Maraini had expressed a preference for setting up a retrospective including the 'most significant works of art of the Ottocento' at the XVI edition.<sup>197</sup> Volpi, convinced that such events should be at the heart of the Biennale, supported Maraini, and suggested a retrospective of the work of Pablo Picasso which, alongside exhibitions of Italian artists, would form the 'pillars of the Biennale'.<sup>198</sup>

On the various Biennale committee meetings, Maraini usually stressed the need for a stricter selection process executed at the level of the numerous syndical exhibitions,<sup>199</sup> allowing the Biennale to host only 'the most significant participants'.<sup>200</sup> According to the secretary general, the Biennale should be a forum reserved 'only for outstanding names'.<sup>201</sup> Its chief purpose was not to 'discover those talents who could be identified at the regional exhibitions, but to recognize them as important artists, thereby serving to enhance their reputations'.<sup>202</sup> A similar policy was applied to the Biennale's foreign exhibitors.

In 1935, the secretary general went further, proposing that only selected *capiscuola* (masters) be invited to the Biennale, which provided an opportunity to devote entire halls to commercially attractive exhibitions.<sup>203</sup> In his most ambitious project, he planned to have just 50 artists invited at the Biennale, with selected painters, sculptors, drawers and engravers holding personal exhibitions. Works by non-invited artists would be strictly limited to pieces identified at the syndical exhibitions.<sup>204</sup> Alverà complained that the Biennale risked turning itself into a 'closed circuit'.<sup>205</sup> Volpi, however, was of the opinion that this policy would allow

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. I, 27/02/30-07/12/31, session 21 January 1931.

<sup>199</sup> These exhibitions were co-ordinated by the Fascist Syndicate of Fine Arts, set up in 1926, and represented the first step of the selection process towards access at the Biennale of International Arts.

<sup>200</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 30 January 1943.

<sup>201</sup> Scotto Lavina, '1927, 1936', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 32*, 82, p. 42.

<sup>202</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 17 December 1940.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, session 18 April 1935.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, session 14 April 1937.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

audiences to come into close contact with ‘mature artists’ with ‘wisdom’, judged not by age but by quality.<sup>206</sup> According to Volpi, the Biennale would be well advised to apply the same system to decorative arts and foreign pavilions. It was essential to assign single halls to a few chosen participants representative of their nations ‘in such a fashion that only the *crème de la crème* of art or the outstanding living *maestri* be displayed at the Biennale’.<sup>207</sup> For Tomasella, this was a way to avoid crowding the exhibition with art work of inferior quality.<sup>208</sup> It might also be concluded, however, that it was a strategic move determined predominantly by commercial forces.

In 1936, the central hall ‘Italia’ held personal exhibits of Carena, Ferrazzi, Severini, Carrà and a retrospective of Chessa. In a time of economic depression and political sanctions, it had become vital to charm as broad an audience as possible with ‘sure-fire’ attractions.<sup>209</sup>

In the 1930s, Maraini also became increasingly concerned with finding a way to stimulate purchases in the foreign sections.<sup>210</sup> He believed that sales were stagnating because of the temporary crisis of the private art market and the appearance of new events similar to the Biennale elsewhere in Italy, a phenomenon that might eventually damage the Venetian institution by dissipating public attention.<sup>211</sup> Volpi made clear his desire to reaffirm the international standing of the exhibition by suggesting that foreign pavilions devote space to a retrospective ‘of very important artists and another two halls to well known living *maestri*’.<sup>212</sup> Maraini agreed, arguing that this would enhance the levels of foreign participation, and preclude the display of works of minor importance. It was vital to concentrate, in every salon, on works of art considered ‘highly significant’, so as to ensure that the most prestigious and interesting aspects of foreign culture were on display.<sup>213</sup> The choice of international artists, argued Maraini, should be negotiated by Volpi

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra*, p. 54.

<sup>209</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 21 March 1939.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid, vol. II, 01/01/32-06/07/34, session 15 November 1932.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 16 March 1936.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid, vol. I, 27/02/30-07/12/31, session 8 June 1931.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid, session 27 February 1930.

and officials representing foreign nations. Margherita Sarfatti complained that when foreign officials were involved, they tended to choose the least impressive international works.<sup>214</sup>

In 1940, the newspaper *Il Piccolo di Trieste* observed of the Biennale:

'If anyone expects a revelation of new trends or artists at this exhibition they will be disappointed. Considering the given hierarchy of expositions, it is unlikely that such revelations emerge within superior events such as the Biennale. It is easier to find them at the *Littoriali* or similar cultural institutions'.<sup>215</sup>

Indeed, at the heart of the exhibition were collections by acclaimed Italian artists such as Carrà, Funi, Carena, Oppo, Severini and Tosi. There were also successful Venetian painters such as Varagnolo, Da Venezia, and Dalla Zorza.<sup>216</sup> The same system was still in use in 1943, which Volpi considered proof of its success.<sup>217</sup> It was no surprise, therefore, that Maraini noted a trend of young artists tending to exhibit at the Biennale via the decorative arts, as this was now the easiest way of breaking through.<sup>218</sup> The figurative arts had become something of a 'closed shop', reserved for the established elite.

~~All of which~~ <sup>this</sup> illustrates the extent to which the Biennale in the 1930s learned to reinvent and rearrange its regulations and policies in order to move with the times. Feasible reform projects had to take into account a growing private art market, and the Biennale needed to appeal to the potential buyer by offering the appropriate product. Organisers thus fostered a strongly commercial outlook which, in practice, meant that the more conventional, 'populist' art forms were afforded a prominent position. If less well known artists had the opportunity to access the *Esposizione Biennale* through minor syndical exhibitions, the core of the Biennales

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid. In the case of the United States, it is significant that the pavilion belonged to a private art gallery, the New York Grand Central Art Gallery. Unsurprisingly, this institution would naturally exhibit the works that it owned itself, not necessarily the works most representative of United States art, fitting in the overall commercial outlook promoted by the Biennale (Ibid, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 28 January 1935).

<sup>215</sup> Silvio Benco, 'Primo sguardo alla Biennale', *Il Piccolo di Trieste*, 25 May 1940.

<sup>216</sup> Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra*, p. 40.

<sup>217</sup> ASAC, Verbalì delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 18 April 1935.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid, session 25 May 1935.



in the 1930s was unsurprisingly reserved for the established arts, favoured by the wealthier patrons.<sup>219</sup> Buyers with more modest means could instead focus on decorative arts, deliberately made available to broaden the range of cultural products on offer. Ultimately, what it was important was that the Biennale entourage was always prepared to modify its rules to be able to meet the changing tastes of the art market. As mass tourism was fast developing in the lagoon, aided by the application of more sophisticated tourist techniques, so the Biennale was able to broaden its commercial appeal, at the same time increasing the numbers of visitors within its gates, and fulfilling its economic function and civic responsibilities.

#### **4.9 The Biennale as mediator between art production and art consumption**

Another way to stimulate sales at the Biennale was to encourage buyers and sellers towards certain genres and styles in order to make them more compatible. In so doing, the Biennale came, for all practical purposes, to acquire the function of a mediator in the 1930s art market. Intervening at the level of art production could provide the Biennale administrative board with a guarantee that the kind of art exhibited would be the most attractive to prospective buyers. After 1930, the secretary general had the responsibility for the following aspects of the Biennale exhibition:

- 1) the arrangement of one hall representing one of the great living *maestri* of the Ottocento or Novecento;
- 2) the arrangement of another hall with one mainstream painter, considered the most representative of his age;
- 3) the arrangement of a miscellaneous hall with works of art of different artists.<sup>220</sup>

Clearly, holding exhibitions of the work of acknowledged talents was

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<sup>219</sup> See also Rizzi, di Marino, *Storia della Biennale*, p. 37.

<sup>220</sup> ASAC, Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. I, 27/02/30-07/12/31, session 4 June 1930.

central in the task of enhancing the Biennale's appeal to the broadest possible audience (at least among the wealthier classes). The task of choosing which works to invite to the Biennale largely fell upon Maraini who was responsible for travelling from one artist's studio to another with the role of selecting works of art to meet the commercial criteria of the organisers.<sup>221</sup> After his visits to the studios, Maraini, with the aid of two committee members, Marcello Piacentini and Beppe Ciardi, compiled a list of works which was subject to approval by Cipriano Efisio Oppo, Secretary General of the Fascist Syndicate of Fine Arts.<sup>222</sup> Records reveal that in several cases it was artists themselves who urged Maraini to pay a visit to their studios.<sup>223</sup>

A study of the correspondence between the Biennale, patrons and artists clearly illustrate how the mediatory role of the Biennale played a vital part within the transaction process. It should be remembered, of course, that the institution had an interest in these processes, retaining as it did some 10-15% of the final selling price. Bazzoni was in charge of writing to the artists suggesting which works of art could be sold to particular customers. He also recommended the final price (always lower than the original selling price), providing the artists with contact numbers, addresses and useful advice. On the other side, he made efforts to win over the potential patron towards a specific genre, style or school. His task was clearly one of seeking to influence the market and encourage purchases by matching potential buyers with particular products.<sup>224</sup> It was no doubt with this kind of activity in mind that Maraini declared that 'Venice should become, from the artistic point of view, a directive centre, a facilitator of communications between artists and connoisseurs, collectors and merchants ... not only an art market but also a great centre of education and moral improvement'.<sup>225</sup>

The Biennale's mediating role was reinforced by the fact that Domenico Varagnolo, Sales Director, contacted various artists in 1935 in order to learn the

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid, session 5 May 1930.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, session 21 January 1931.

<sup>223</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, 'Pubblicità 1928'.

<sup>224</sup> ASAC, Serie Segreteria/Arti Visive-Amministrazione, 'Risposte di Artisti 1936-37'.

<sup>225</sup> Maraini, 'La funzione internazionale delle Biennali veneziane', *La Rivista di Venezia*, April 1932.

present locations of their works within foreign art galleries.<sup>226</sup> This reflected a determination to monitor the process of selection of works of art at the Biennale, after the system of invitations had been radically changed at the beginning of the 1930s (see previous section). Detailed sales registers helped to keep track of who was buying what. Varagnolo also conducted a survey of Italian art collections possessed by private galleries and patrons in order to provide an overview of the private art market and the tastes of private collectors.<sup>227</sup> It is possible to see this as another attempt to improve the Biennale's ability to predict future trends and fashions.

The *Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee* holds a number of significant records relating to correspondence between various artists and the administrative board which provide a clear picture of the willingness of the Biennale to connect buyers to sellers. For example, on 30 October 1930, Varagnolo wrote to Michele Cascella expressing his disappointment that the Biennale sales office had not been able to sell any of the artist's works at their original asking prices. Nonetheless, he had identified a company which had offered 400 lire for one of Cascella's paintings. Significantly, he concluded the letter with this recommendation: 'If you are content with this small amount the deal is struck and we suggest you accept it'.<sup>228</sup> Some months later, Varagnolo contacted art collector Marco Barnabò informing him that the painter Seibezzi was 'happy' to accept his offer of 1,500 lire for the painting 'Riva delle Zattere' which had been tagged at an original price of 5,000 lire. On the other hand, sculptor Eugenio Bellotto was not satisfied with the offer of 2,000 lire for the bronze 'Testa di boscaiuolo' (originally priced at 4,000 lire). Varagnolo, in his role of commercial mediator, advised Barnabò to offer to Bellotto 3,000 lire or at least 2,500 lire, perhaps adding 500 or 1,000 lire for the purchase of another of his works.<sup>229</sup>

On the same day, Varagnolo addressed Dr. Amistani informing him that the French painter Prinnet and Italian painter De Bernardi had followed the earlier

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<sup>226</sup> ASAC, Serie Segreteria Arti Visive/Amministrazione, 'Risposte di Artisti 1936-37'.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> ASAC, Serie Copialettere, Domenico Varagnolo, letter to Michele Cascella, vol. 210, 1930, n. 16.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, Varagnolo, letter to Marco Barnabò, vol. 210, 1930, n. 20.

advice of the Biennale administration, and had accepted the offers of 4,000 lire and 1,000 lire respectively for their paintings 'La Reprimenda' and 'Tintoria'. Not all the people concerned were so accommodating, and the painter Italo Brass provided an example of an artist insisting stubbornly upon a minimum price. In the case of Brass and the drawing in question (which had been produced using a special technique and for which he demanded a minimum payment of 450 lire), Varagnolo urged Amistani to meet the artist's price for what he described as a 'very special, very interesting piece'.<sup>230</sup>

On another occasion, an identical letter was sent to two different companies at the same time, the *Unione Esercizi Elettrici* in Milan and the *Alti Forni e Acciaierie* in Terni. Briefly, Varagnolo informed their managers that at the XVII Biennale there were to be exhibited some *acqueforti* by Emilio Mazzoni Zarini representing 'important and interesting' power stations at Furlo and Castellano. According to Varagnolo, those *acqueforti* had been amongst the prize winners at a competition organised by Volpi's *SADÉ* at which they had been greatly acclaimed by the audience. The official urged the two companies to purchase some or the entire range 'not only for propaganda reasons, but also in order to encourage the art of the *acquaforte* which [was] the noblest means of illustrating the different industrial activities'.<sup>231</sup> It is particularly interesting in this case to note Varagnolo's efforts to combine economic factors, artistic merit and ideological and educational purposes in his 'sales pitch'.

On 10 November 1930, the Biennale executives contacted Gino Tenti, Director General of Fine Arts at the Ministry of National Education, urging him to spend an additional 17,000 lire at the Biennale on behalf of the *Galleria Nazionale*. The officer recommended the painting 'Giona', by Helfer, which was priced at 6,000 lire and 'Giulioti', by Romanelli, at the price of 10,000 lire. He also made clear that he had insisted that both painters reduce their original asking price.<sup>232</sup> The next day, a letter was addressed to Professor Giulio Pari in which Varagnolo suggested that he take advantage of 'good opportunities to buy valuable works of

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid, Varagnolo, letter to Dr. Amistani, vol. 210, 1930, n. 23.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, Varagnolo, letter to the *Unione Esercizi Elettrici*, Milan and *Alti Forni e Acciaierie*, Terni, vol. 210, 1930, n. 40.

art at special conditions'. Knowing that Pari had already expressed an interest in paintings by Milesi, Beraldini and Brugnoli, and was ready to purchase them had they been less expensive, Varagnolo, revelling in the role of mediator, revealed that the sales office 'would be able to lower prices to figures that would be very convenient for the buyer'. He also urged Pari to formulate a minimum offer, being confident that this would then be accepted by the vendor.<sup>233</sup> In a similar fashion, in 1940, the officer, concerned at a drop in sales at the Biennale, asked Bazzoni to write letters to private collectors in order to exhort them to make purchases at the XXII edition. With true commercial spirit, Bazzoni outlined various lists of possible acquirers which Varagnolo then checked and corrected in order to avoid making '*buchi nell'acqua*' (mistakes). Varagnolo, was understandably keen to concentrate attention on proprietors and entrepreneurs 'with large means' rather than 'big names with no money'.<sup>234</sup>

A number of factors allowed Bazzoni and Varagnolo to perform their mediating roles between buyers and sellers. They were able to draw upon a good knowledge of the general art field and also the particular market conditions relevant to the Biennale. They had acquired all the necessary means through records stored at the *Archivio Storico*, and it was simply a matter of keeping artists and art lovers linked together. In this sense, much of their correspondence focused upon the organisational aspects of transactions such as price details and bargaining opportunities, leaving out lengthy consideration of the content of particular artworks and their aesthetic merit or ideological value. Again, this says much about the nature of the Biennale as a genuine business enterprise as well as a cultural institution.

At the end of the 1920s and through the 1930s, the Ministry for the Press and Propaganda had charged the Biennale board with the responsibility for arranging overseas art events.<sup>235</sup> The Biennale was officially considered as an 'auxiliary organisation' in the management of foreign exhibitions,<sup>236</sup> and had

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid, Varagnolo, letter to Gino Tenti, vol. 210, 1930, n. 59.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid, Varagnolo, letter to Giulio Pari, vol. 210, 1930, n. 67.

<sup>234</sup> Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra*, p. 73.

<sup>235</sup> ACS, Atti della Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 1932, busta n. 3462, prot. 14/1/283.

<sup>236</sup> ASAC, Serie Segreteria/Arti Visive, 'Unità 02: Mostra Settecento'.

therefore formed a special permanent committee of fifteen persons to oversee them.<sup>237</sup> Those showcases mainly involved those artists regularly exhibiting at the Venice Biennale who could subsequently present their works outside the Italian circuit. Artworks were transported around the different European capitals,<sup>238</sup> providing an effective means of entry into overseas markets.<sup>239</sup> Usually, Maraini tried to avoid taking artworks overseas if they had not already been displayed at the Biennale.<sup>240</sup>

If for Fascism, setting up cultural showcases outside the Italian borders had nationalist and ideological value in its own right, for the Biennale entourage, it embodied an additional means of developing the overseas market. Arguably, therefore, the most important concern was the opportunity to extend the scope and period of the Venetian cultural events programme. The Biennale exhibitions abroad had been described as ‘the most suitable organisation for the integration of the ministerial services of propaganda’.<sup>241</sup> In reality, however, they constituted more evidence of the mediatory role acquired by Venice within the international art markets and the commercial outlook retained by the *Ente Autonomo Biennale*.

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<sup>237</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, ‘Mostre Biennali all'estero 1927’.

<sup>238</sup> ASAC, Serie Segreteria/Arti Visive, ‘Corrispondenza 1935’.

<sup>239</sup> In 1930, the Milanese journal *Giovedì* revealed how the greatest and most powerful art markets were the foreign ones. Even the French market had been lately overtaken by Amsterdam, London, Köln, Berlin, Lipzeig and Wien. According to the newspaper, a lot of Italian artworks were commercialised within those markets. Amsterdam, London and Köln were particularly closely associated with the most authoritative American art dealers, providing a commercial channel for European art to the United States. Around 50 per cent of the Italian art of any era was found in the luxurious and large catalogues edited by those foreign companies on the occasion of their three or four annual sales (Armando Giacconi, ‘Cronache di belle arti. Gli acquisti e le vendite’, *Giovedì*, 10 July 1930).

<sup>240</sup> Tomasella, *Biennali di Guerra*, p. 85.

<sup>241</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 44, ‘Mostre Biennale all'estero 1933’.

### **Part Three: The decorative arts**

In the mid-1930s, the pavilion of decorative arts was opened within the Venice Biennale, a further development in a series of initiatives that included the *Settecento* Exhibition and the Goldsmith's Salon of 1930. Its history parallels that of the fine arts exhibition inasmuch as it retained the 'civic function' of supporting the local economy. In the first place, it aimed at relieving the shortcomings of Venetian commerce by promoting traditional Venetian handicrafts through specific salons. Exhibition culture was once again being employed not only to boost tourism in the lagoon by offering another spectacle, but also to contribute directly to the rehabilitation of the local economy by publicising and celebrating local craftsmanship and manufacturing skills. The project was essentially characterised by a Venetian flavour which was far more striking than any nationalist or Fascist functions that the exhibition may have served, in that it honoured local traditions and products more than it expressed the ideological agenda of either Italian nationalism or the Fascist regime.

The decorative arts pavilion can also be seen as a reaction to the Biennale authorities recognition of the need to include, alongside the fine art exhibits, cultural products within the more modest price range of the average visitor. The new exhibition thus responded to the expansion and fragmentation of the private art market with the inclusion of numerous, less wealthy buyers, a process already analysed in section 4.5. As was the case with all of the new cultural showcases staged in Venice, the initiative enjoyed widespread publicity and benefited from the provision of discounted train fares to encourage the highest possible number of tourists to visit the new exhibition. In this sense, the decorative arts pavilion was simply a further and perhaps more obvious stage in the processes of the commodification of culture occurring at the Biennale.

#### **4.10 The state of Venetian handicrafts in the 1920s**

After World War I, tourism and traditional Venetian crafts<sup>242</sup> were

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<sup>242</sup> They included glassware, mosaics, pearls, furniture, artistic masks, textiles and leather, embroidery, shawls, wrought iron, paintings on velvet, ceramics, lacquers, works on copper and other metals, gold smelting and pottery (ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, 'Consiglio

undergoing a major crisis. Small-scale handicrafts suffered under the pressures of recession and mounting competition from large-scale, low-cost mass producers.<sup>243</sup> According to the contemporary press, the crisis was rooted in the erosion of conventional distinctions between ‘art’ and ‘industry’ that resulted in the *bottega* (artisan workshop) being overtaken by the factory, where there was little place for the artist’s individual creativity.<sup>244</sup> The industrial system naturally overpowered the small workshop, which had long been Venice’s primary economic unit.

According to the *Consiglio Provinciale dell’Economia Corporativa* -a body overseeing economic expansion and representing Fascist corporatist politics in the province- Venetian artistic lacework suited for a more refined market had lost many wealthy buyers among the connoisseurs who had traditionally favoured the products of Venice and Burano<sup>245</sup> above those of competitors.<sup>246</sup> The production of enamel for mosaics had been diminishing due to the lack of orders, while the wrought iron industry’s recession had commenced in 1927 when both the domestic and export markets contracted dramatically.<sup>247</sup> Levels of Venetian glassware production had also declined due to the reduction in tourist numbers, while foreign competition simply exacerbated existing difficulties, especially for small businesses. Foreign exports to North-America, which had hitherto represented one of the best markets, were also in decline, although this was compensated for to some extent by the acquisition of an increasing market share in Germany and British imperial territories in Africa and the Indian sub-continent.<sup>248</sup> By late 1924, however, Italy, like other European countries, was facing a combination of inflation and foreign competition.<sup>249</sup>

With a newly established regime devoted to making Italy one of Europe’s leading markets, the Venetian ruling elite committed itself to the rebirth of local activities and the revival of the city’s heavily run-down economy. To achieve this,

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Provinciale dell’Economia di Venezia. Adunanza Plenaria, 12 December 1930’).

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Gino Calibano, ‘Creazione artistica e ‘meccanismo’’, *Il Giornale di Sicilia*, 17 July 1929.

<sup>245</sup> Burano is part of the *Comune di Venezia* and specialises in artistic lacework.

<sup>246</sup> AMV, Consiglio ed Ufficio Provinciale dell’Economia Corporativa di Venezia, *L’attività economica della Provincia di Venezia nell’anno 1931*, Venezia, 1933.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*, p. 11.



regional crafts needed to develop greater resonance, both in Italy and abroad. One of the strategies adopted by the Venetian administration to extend the recognition of traditional local products throughout Europe was to arrange (or revive) specialised pavilions and exhibitions culminating in the spectacular *Mostra del Settecento Veneto* of 1929 (celebrating Venice's economic apex of the 18<sup>th</sup> century), and the opening of the Biennale decorative arts pavilion in 1934.

The Venetian municipality had first established its own exhibitions of local labour in the opening years of the century, called *Esposizioni Permanenti d'Arti ed Industrie Veneziane dell'Opera Bevilacqua La Masa*,<sup>250</sup> held in Palazzo Pesaro. In the mid-1920s, these events were appropriated by Fascism to serve an ideological agenda. Organised with the consent of the Syndicate of Fine Arts by an executive committee drawn from the *Istituto Veneto per le Piccole Industrie e il Lavoro* (Venetian Institute for the Small Industries and Employment -a regional body to boost economic relations) and the Fascist Federation of Craftsmen, the showcase was financed by local institutions, 'without exceeding the annual sum of 10,000 lire'.<sup>251</sup> For the *Consiglio Provinciale*, it was vital to stimulate local handicraft production as well as artistic and technical enhancement, and targets were set to encourage efficiency and promote an annual display of selected handicraft products chosen by the Duchess Bevilacqua La Masa.<sup>252</sup> Interestingly, the municipality staged the 1929 event at the Lido, within a pavilion lent, not surprisingly, by the Ciga, an arrangement anticipating the tourist plan adopted in the 1930s.<sup>253</sup> The 1931 edition, once again held at the Lido, was purposely organised 'during the bathing season',<sup>254</sup> and in 1937, the Podestà ordered the exhibition be put under the heading 'tourism'.<sup>255</sup>

<sup>250</sup> La Masa was the Duchess who had donated the premises.

<sup>251</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, 'Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia di Venezia. Adunanza Plenaria, 12 December 1930'.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'XX Mostra dell'Opera Bevilacqua La Masa', trim. II, 1929, n. 1889.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, 'XXII Mostra dell'Opera Bevilacqua La Masa. Acquisto opere d'arte', trim. II, 1931, n. 1857. In 1935 the Ciga could not loan its premises at the Lido. Thus, the exhibition of the *Opera Bevilacqua La Masa* was held at the Biennale Gardens, within the Belgium pavilion (Ibid, 'XXVI Mostra dell'Opera Bevilacqua La Masa. VI del Sindacato Belle Arti', trim. III, 1935, n. 1555).

<sup>255</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. XXVII Mostra dell'Opera Bevilacqua La Masa. VII del Sindacato Belle Arti', trim. III, 1936, n. 1017.

During wartime too, the typical Venetian products of lace, embroidery and glassware did not lose their primary function of attracting tourists. For example, in 1941, the Podestà explained that in order to boost tourism in Venice, particularly important given the loss of trade suffered as a result of the war, the *Comune* had arranged an exhibition of woman's fashion called 'Il Tessile e l'Abbigliamento Autarchico', in addition to the usual summer season celebrations.<sup>256</sup> To complement the event, the organisers arranged tiny exhibitions of goods and accessories linked to Venetian fashion surrounding the main exhibition. According to the Podestà, the initiative's principal aim was to highlight the national textile industry's great effort, within the autarchic framework dictated by the regime. However, he also claimed that the exhibition would add fresh vibrancy to the Venetian summer season with consequent advantages for those involved in the local tourist sector and dependent industries.<sup>257</sup>

Moreover, it was followed by a convention of the main delegates of syndical and corporative bodies of Italy and Germany to discuss problems of production, taste and distribution in the textile and clothing domain.<sup>258</sup> Even the syndical exhibitions of handicraft represented a source of tourism for the Venetians. While Fascism had taken advantage of these old fairs to serve its own propaganda needs, Venice had used the Fascist ideological drive to advance its own plans for the revival of local markets, the growth of tourism, and the expansion of the Lido.

#### 4.11 The *Settecento* Exhibition

The celebration of Venetian traditional crafts reached its apex in 1929, when the *Settecento* Exhibition of 18<sup>th</sup>-century art products was set up within Venice's Biennale gardens. The idea for the exhibition apparently originated with the Prince of Piedmont. Initially awarded to Rome, pressure from Volpi, Giovanni Giuriati

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Il tessile e l'abbigliamento autarchico a Venezia', trim. II, 1941, n. 1190.

<sup>257</sup> According to the *Corriere della Sera*, the character acquired by the event was essentially of commercial nature (Zorzi, 'Alta moda e tessuti autarchici tra le manifestazioni dell'arte Veneziana', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 14 January 1941). As usual, the event was financed by the Venetian Tourist Agency, with the executive committee consisting of the Director of the *Ente Nazionale della Moda*, plus representatives from the *Unione Industriali*, the *Istituto Veneto per il Lavoro*, the Tourist Office, craftsmen's and goldsmiths' organisations (AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Il tessile e l'abbigliamento autarchico a Venezia', trim. II, 1941, n. 1190).

<sup>258</sup> Zorzi, 'Alta moda'.

and Podestà Orsi led to the event being brought to Venice.<sup>259</sup>

According to the town council, the exhibition was intended to 'adequately reaffirm the grandeur and originality of Italian art in the XVIII century', and contained drawings, paintings, sculptures, antiques, furniture, books, engravings, plus typical Venetian products such as glassware, lacework and embroidery.<sup>260</sup> By its sheer scale, the Venetian authorities made it clear that the *Settecento* Exhibition was to be the cornerstone of the project to rejuvenate traditional handicrafts.<sup>261</sup> This time, it was not only about generally increasing tourist numbers as in the case of other well-known cultural events staged in Venice, it was about raising the profile of those products at the heart of the Venetian economy.

It is relatively easy to demonstrate that the initiative was conceived to benefit local producers.<sup>262</sup> On 25 July 1929, Renzo Bertozzi, the provincial secretary of the Autonomous Fascist Federation of Italian Craftsmen, contacted the general secretariat of the event to complain that one Venetian company specialising in the reproduction of *Settecento* antique furniture was enjoying publicity within the exhibition catalogues. According to the Federation, this amounted to unfairly favouring just one business to the disadvantage of other, equally worthy local manufacturers. Instead, Bertozzi suggested that the secretariat add a list of all the craft workshops of *Settecento* items located in Venice to the catalogue, in order to benefit a much wider range of local businesses.<sup>263</sup> Moreover, the name of the *Istituto Veneto per il Lavoro* had to appear in the official catalogue.<sup>264</sup> This joint

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<sup>259</sup> 'Un'esposizione del Settecento Italiano indetta a Venezia per l'estate', *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 1 May 1929.

<sup>260</sup> The 18th century represented the golden age for the production of Venetian traditional crafts.

<sup>261</sup> ASAC, Serie Segreteria/Arti Visive, unità 01, 'Mostra '700 e XVII Biennale 1929-30'. This is also demonstrated by the type of institutions involved in promoting the exhibition, which were devoted to the economy rather than to the arts. These included the Fascist General Confederation of Italian Industry, the National Confederation of the Fascist Syndicates of Commerce, the Fascist General Confederation of Agriculture, the National Institute for Small Industries, the Autonomous Fascist Federation of the Italian Craftsmen and the National Confederation of the Fascist Syndicates of Terrestrial Transports and Internal Navigation (Ibid.) It is interesting to notice that the kind of buyers who intervened at the event represented an anticipation of the market for decorative arts created at the 1930s Biennales. Figures like Alfredo Campione, Vittorio Cini, Paolo Ingegnoli, Ilario Montesi, Mario Queriolo, Achille Gaggia and Enrico Coen Cagli purchasing artworks at the *Settecento* Exhibition of 1929 were the same ones later acting as patrons at the Biennale pavilions of decorative arts (Ibid).

<sup>262</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, 'Mostra del Settecento'.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid, 'Istituto Veneto per il Lavoro e le Piccole Industrie'.

celebration of art and industry completed the commercialisation of the event: artists were entrepreneurs and the pavilion itself resembled a shopping arcade as much as an artistic salon.

Speaking about the exhibition, Podestà Orsi said: 'I consider this a good initiative from the historic, artistic and above all economic point of view, an idea that will benefit tourism for a number of years. This aims at fulfilling an outstanding programme: I hope it will constitute an exceptional event, drawing the attention of the entire world, so as to make Venice the source of the *Settecento*, of all the *Settecento*, in all the countries, in all its manifestations. The programme should be of international interest, even though great importance will be given to the Italian section (...).'<sup>265</sup> According to Orsi, the exhibition was also dedicated to the representation and glorification of 'the highest manifestation of Italianness'.<sup>266</sup>

Yet, beyond the surface of rhetoric, the exhibition, upon which a significant proportion of the year's tourist income was thought to be reliant - like many of the cultural events staged in Venice at the time - was a product of local identity and not just because it was commemorating Venice's past economic splendour. With many art lovers expected to be attracted to the lagoon, it was supported by a series of concerts, theatre plays and trips to the Venetian palaces and *Ville Venete*.<sup>267</sup>

The event was organised in 1929 in order to bridge the gap between the 1928 and 1930 Biennales and, as argued in chapter 2, the aim was to provide a constant level of tourist flows into Venice by arranging at least one outstanding exhibition around which others could be developed. This is also mirrored by what Podestà Orsi declared:

'The XVI Exhibition of International Arts of 1928, as well as constituting an artistic and

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<sup>265</sup> ASAC, Serie Arti Visive/Segreteria Generale, unità 02, 'Mostra '700'.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid, unità 01, 'Mostra '700 e XVII Biennale 1929-30'.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid. Events strictly tied to the *Settecento* Exhibition were also established. Of particular note in August 1929, was space given by the *Federazione Nazionale Fascista dell'Abbigliamento* for displays of Italian Fashion at the Excelsior Ciga Hotel at the Lido, which included celebrations of lacework, shawls, Damask and Brocade, with the *Croce Rossa Italiana* also organising a costume ball at the hotel.<sup>267</sup> As with other cultural showcases, the initiative was financed by the *Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo* in Venice, (AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Mostra del '700 Italiano', trim. IV, 1929, n. 2925) with the artistic arrangement left to Nino Barbantini and the administrative management to Romolo Bazzoni (Ibid, 'Pagamento compenso ai preposti alla direzione e organizzazione della Mostra del Settecento Italiano', trim. IV, 1929, n. 3168).

cultural manifestation worthy of the glorious local traditions and past retrospectives, has positively increased the movement of visitors towards Venice, as revealed by Biennale statistics. The gap year between Biennales could be profitably devoted to the preparation of another art manifestation. The event would contribute to increase tourism towards the lagoon, when considering the fact that the *Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo* has been created this year with a separate budget from that of the municipality'.<sup>268</sup>

Whether or not the *Settecento* Exhibition retained 'a purely artistic character free of every commercial and speculative aim', as Orsi thought, Venice would gain 'several general advantages' from it, and for this reason, the initiative deserved the town council's complete attention.<sup>269</sup> As the cultural enterprise *par excellence* of 1929, it became part of a joint venture with the International Boat Racing<sup>270</sup> at the Lido that was established with the aim of exploiting the benefits of transport concessions. Combined tickets were issued for the two events, with discounted transport available for most of the tourist season. For the benefit of tourism, therefore, it was hoped to establish a spiritual link between art and sport.<sup>271</sup>

As for cultural showcases already analysed, the same modes of promotion of the event were employed. A massive publicity programme was organised, together with a request for travel discounts made to the central government, which was awarded by the Minister of Communications, Costanzo Ciano, with train fare reductions of 50%, starting from 15<sup>th</sup> June.<sup>272</sup> As noted earlier, such discounts were crucial to the success of an art showcase as they encouraged more tourists into the city. Travelcards issued for the occasion, in fact, made up 1/3 of the *Settecento* Exhibition's profits,<sup>273</sup> with the executive committee earning 10 lire upon single rail tickets issued within the Veneto region, and 5 lire upon those issued outside of it.<sup>274</sup> Fare concessions were allegedly only granted following direct intervention from Volpi and Giovanni Giuriati,<sup>275</sup> after Ciano had refused to extend them for the

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<sup>268</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Mostra del '700 Italiano', trim. II, 1929, n. 1086.

<sup>269</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 50, 'Mostra del Settecento 1929'.

<sup>270</sup> Not surprisingly, president of the event was Giuseppe Volpi.

<sup>271</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 50, 'Concorso Motonautico Internazionale'.

<sup>272</sup> ASAC, Serie Segreteria/Arti Visive, unità 02, 'Mostra '700'.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 50, 'Bollettino commerciale delle Ferrovie dello Stato'.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 'Pubblicità 1929'.

~~entire~~ duration of the exhibition ‘because too many reductions ha[d] been conceded for similar manifestations’.<sup>276</sup>

To promote awareness of the event’s international significance, special train discounts of 70% were granted to the Italian and foreign press and art critics.<sup>277</sup> For holidaymakers, the local Tourist Office arranged a publicity stand welcoming ‘the Italian and cosmopolitan public’ while, upon their arrival in Venice, an official provided visitors with comprehensive information about the celebrations.<sup>278</sup>

With regard to mass participation, Silvio Versino, Inspector of the Provincial Section of the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro*, expressed the desire that workers be able to partake in the ‘moral and material elevation’ of such ‘a pure emanation of Fascism’ that he believed had been fostered by the exhibition.<sup>279</sup> The Central Direction of the OND also promised to engage in a sustained publicity campaign across the Italian provinces to promote the initiative.<sup>280</sup> Other reductions were given to societies of workers, veterans’ associations and *Dopolavoro* members, including discounted educational trips to the islands of Burano and Murano, the traditional home of lacework and glassware production.<sup>281</sup> However, while special attention was paid to providing ‘popular trains’ to the exhibition as ‘a means of attracting a large number of visitors’ and therefore favouring tourism, spiritual matters such as the ‘elevation of the masses’ were not really contemplated by the organisers.<sup>282</sup>

It is thus somewhat ironic that on 18 September 1929, following widespread critical acclaim, the Podestà justified his request for further travel reductions by reaffirming the non-profit-making character of the event, despite his expressed

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid, ‘Mostra del Settecento 1929’.

<sup>278</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Turismo. Banco di informazioni turistiche in Piazza San Marco sotto i portici del Palazzo Ducale dal lato del molo’, trim. III, 1936, n. 1730.

<sup>279</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 50, ‘Ribassi per dopolavoristi alla Mostra del Settecento’.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> ASAC, Serie Segreteria/Arti Visive, unità 02, ‘Mostra ‘700’.

<sup>282</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Turismo. Banco di informazioni turistiche in Piazza San Marco sotto i portici del Palazzo Ducale dal lato del molo’, trim. III, 1936, n. 1730. The *Istituto Veneto per il Lavoro* went further in its efforts to lure even more art lovers to the exhibition, by organising cultural courses about the *Settecento* that were aimed at workers and craftsmen in the trades involved. Taking place within the Biennale pavilions, the courses would constitute ‘a great means of attraction of the audience’ in addition to the advertising posters that hung outside the Biennale gardens. Combined tickets for the courses and the exhibition were also made available

desire for economic return:

‘The *Settecento* Exhibition, which has now been open for about two months, has obtained and continues to obtain a great success among the public and critics. The number of visitors increases each day and art lovers have pleaded that such an interesting event be granted an extension. Therefore, the organisers have reached the unanimous decision to postpone the closure to 31<sup>st</sup> October. To do so, it is vital that this Ministry allow an extension of fare reductions previously granted until 10<sup>th</sup> October. This extension would be justified by the fact that the enterprise had to renounce to ticket rights from 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> September in favour of the Committee of the International Boat Racing. You know well that the goals are absolutely and exclusively cultural, in spite of various costs and sacrifices, and that an extension of twenty days could bring *remarkable economic advantage* to the city of Venice’.<sup>283</sup>

From this statement, it is evident that there was constant communication with central government to reassure it of the spiritual purpose of such exhibitions. Yet, it is also clear, once more, that for the Venetian ruling class, cultural tourism in its various manifestations was strongly linked to immediate economic benefits and the vitality of Venice. In fact, the connection was so strong that the ‘exclusively cultural’ was nonchalantly associated with ‘remarkable economic advantage’. Thus, any demand that led to a different goal (i.e. nationalisation, fascistization, etc.) remained very much a secondary aim. The *Settecento* Exhibition retained the character of a catalyst event for 1929, of the likes of the Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese exhibitions organised in the 1930s in order to bridge the gap between Biennales. Yet, it also served the purpose of enhancing Venetian typical products in a joint celebration of cultural tourism and local economy.

#### **4.12 Initiatives in favour of art and industry**

Since the *Settecento* experiment had proved successful, the *Consiglio Provinciale dell’Economia Corporativa* soon envisaged the arrangement of similar showcases in the future, along with a series of initiatives designed to uplift the historic Venetian product. On 12 December 1930, the *Consiglio* gathered to discuss

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(ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 50, ‘Corsi cultura ‘700’).

a variety of activities for the promotion of artistic-industrial manufacture in the area. The board began by reaffirming the central importance of the artistic output of medium and small factories for the district, and Venice in particular.<sup>284</sup> Glassware, mosaics, pearls, furniture, artistic textiles and leather, shawls, wrought iron, paintings on velvet, works on copper and other metals, gold smelting and pottery constituted subtle manifestations of Venetian artistic traditions that fuelled commercial activity for the local and international markets. Nonetheless, a comparison of previous production and trade figures reveals how the quantity, quality and value of manufactured products had been diminishing.<sup>285</sup> Members of the *Consiglio Provinciale* were of the opinion that this negative trend was the result of the better industrial and commercial structures of rival Italian regions in addition to increased foreign competition caused by the more effective production of similar goods overseas.<sup>286</sup>

According to the *Consiglio Provinciale*, these issues were essential for the future well-being of the Veneto region. While agriculture had become intensive, and large-scale manufacturing had experienced rapid modernisation, once flourishing medium and small-scale industries were in decline.<sup>287</sup> Principally, this was related to the lack of knowledge of suitable markets for the distribution of Venetian goods, plus the poor organisation in the exchange relationship between markets and the persistent crises of production.<sup>288</sup> Energies currently employed in these fields needed to be revitalised and multiplied, in order to increase production potential in the interest of both the local and national economies. The Venetian authorities also sought to encourage such reforms by organising ~~the~~<sup>their</sup> own initiatives.<sup>289</sup>

For the *Consiglio*, more than just a centre of artistic production, Venice was also an outstanding tourist magnet, attracting numerous visitors with its singular

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<sup>283</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 50, 'Mostra '700'.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid, busta n. 63, 'Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia di Venezia. Adunanza plenaria del 12 dicembre 1930'.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 4 June 1931.



historical grandeur and artistic heritage. From spring to autumn, statistics established an annual movement of between 350,000 and 550,000 travellers.<sup>290</sup> For decades, the town council had created and sustained the Exhibition of International Arts, which constituted not only a conspicuous international art market, but also ‘a spiritual centre within the domain of figurative arts’.<sup>291</sup> It had also inspired other enterprises, such as the *Settecento* Exhibition of 1929, which had registered excellent results: while the Biennales had hitherto received 6,000,000 people, the *Settecento* Exhibition could claim 350,000 visitors.<sup>292</sup>

For all of the reasons mentioned above, the President of the *Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia Corporativa*, in collaboration with the *Istituto Veneto per le Piccole Industrie e per il Lavoro*, the National Autonomous Fascist Federation of Italian Craftsmen and the Provincial Secretariat, the National Institute of Handicraft and Small Industries, the National Federation of Syndicates of Glassware Industry, the Provincial Union of Fascist Syndicates of Industry and other local institutions, promoted the following initiatives:<sup>293</sup>

- the creation of industrial and decorative pavilions within the biennial Exhibition of International Arts;
- the participation of local handicraft industries to the Exhibitions of the *Opera Bevilacqua La Masa* at Ca' Pesaro;
- the institution of sample exhibitions for brokers.<sup>294</sup>

These projects, whether concerned directly with tourism or traditional crafts, serve to reinforce the thesis that the Venetian ruling class exploited the exhibition culture with the primary aim of reinvigorating the local economy. As the *Consiglio Provinciale* stated, the industrial and decorative pavilions within the

<sup>290</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, ‘Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia di Venezia. Adunanza Plenaria, 12 December 1930’.

<sup>291</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 4 June 1931.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Giovanni Giuriati, Secretary of the Venetian section of PNF granted his patronage to the initiatives (Ibid).

<sup>294</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, ‘Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia di Venezia. Adunanza Plenaria, 12 December 1930’.

Exhibition of International Arts should have been filled with the permission of the *Ente Autonomo Biennale* which wanted to place Italian decorative production in contact with the international public, in order to ease the distribution of products, promote better understanding and encourage the improvement and perfection of goods.<sup>295</sup> Those salons had to be conceived as international exhibitions of selected items produced by craftsmen and artists of every nationality, but mainly Italian,<sup>296</sup> and every rank of contemporary decorative and industrial art. The goal was to represent the exact evolution of taste and the conditions of production within a determined branch of the industrial arts, without excluding retrospective exhibitions that were of particular interest to the public, manufacturers and artists.<sup>297</sup>

The opening of one or more decorative arts pavilions should coincide with that of the Exhibition of International Arts itself. By 1932, an exhibition of artistic glassware, lacework and embroidery (from 1<sup>st</sup> May to 15<sup>th</sup> August) and another of textiles and enamels (from 25<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> August) were also arranged.<sup>298</sup> Permanent and semi-permanent exhibitions of sample items suitable for export were located in the *Istituto Veneto per il Lavoro* and included glassware, mosaics, enamels, wrought iron, traditional artistic textiles, lacework, embroidery, furniture, leather, ceramics, lacquers and precious stones.<sup>299</sup> Industrial art products for display were limited and carefully selected by each production workshop.<sup>300</sup> To obtain the best results, appropriate publicity needed to be made by the Chambers of Commerce, the municipal Tourist Office, various tourist agencies and the Ciga. All the organisational costs (including rents, insurance and publicity) were to be met by the

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> To beat off competition rather than boosting nationalism.

<sup>297</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, 'Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia di Venezia. Adunanza Plenaria, 12 December 1930'.

<sup>298</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. I, 27/02/30-07/12/31, session 3 March 1930. Those sections were to be financed by the *Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia Corporativa*, the *Istituto Veneto per le Piccole Industrie e per il Lavoro*, the General Fascist Confederation of Industry, the Autonomous Fascist Federation of Handicraft Communities, the National Institute for Handicraft and Small Industries, and the National Federation of the Fascist Syndicates of Glassware (Ibid). The Biennale board contributed to the costs of the premises, their furnishing and the management of the sales office, while the *Istituto Veneto per il Lavoro* assumed any remaining organisational responsibilities. A special board of artists and experts was also established, which included the Biennale secretary, the administrative director and an executive committee responsible for setting up the pavilions of decorative arts (Ibid).

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

*Istituto Veneto per il Lavoro*, which also oversaw the administrative management and technical control of production.<sup>301</sup>

Most notable was the enthusiasm of the Fascist *Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia Corporativa* for further cultural exploitation. Records show how the *Settecento* Exhibition and the Biennale pavilion of decorative arts were created with the explicit task of favouring Venetian industries<sup>302</sup> rather than national education, while culture was also used to stimulate a commercial resurgence in a restricted area. Aided by official Fascist institutions, the Venetian administration was giving way to a 'narrow' project with the regional perspective taking precedent over the national. Between the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, the municipality felt compelled to merge art and commerce into a unique combination, capable of initiating the revitalisation of traditional activities. For the Venetian business elites, exhibition culture was not so much about the inculcation of Fascist ideology among the workers, but the enhancement of the traditional local economy. Above all, it is essential to recognise that the promotion of regional products was commercial rather than ideological.

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid. The Institute also struck deals with the *Sezione Autonoma di Credito per l'Artigianato e le Piccole Industrie* to ease the concession of credit during the production phase. All the handicraft companies that wished to participate in the sample exhibitions had to apply to the *Istituto Veneto per il Lavoro*, and provide a description of products with photos and prices. Having considered these, the executive committee made its decision based upon the 'commercial' potential of the presented item (ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, 'Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia di Venezia. Adunanza Plenaria, 12 December 1930').

<sup>302</sup> As the crisis of local industries deepened in 1931, the town council in tandem with the Biennale administrative board set out to finance a forthcoming convention of glassware entrepreneurs and technicians, to formulate a strategy to revitalise the field. To guarantee the event's success, Venetian representatives thought of arranging a type of joint venture with their English counterparts (Ibid, 'Note sul progettato convegno di industriali e tecnologi del vetro italiani ed inglesi'). In a detailed report from November 1931, Bazzoni revealed how the English director of the Institute for Glassware Research in Sheffield and representative of the Society of Glass Technology, Professor Turner, was the most acclaimed glassware technician. Turner made clear in his speeches that the glassware industry would gain an outstanding position only through strict co-operation amongst industrialised countries, with one possibility to further the advancement of the field, being the organisation of specialist conventions to enable the exchange of the latest technical knowledge (Ibid). For this reason, an International Artistic Congress took place in Venice in 1932, where the National Fascist Federation of Glassware Industry asked Professor Turner to resolve the increasingly worrying recession of typical Venetian products. The Federation arranged a glassware exhibition within the 1932 Biennale which involved the main Venetian glassware producers such as 'Perle e Conterie', 'Cristalleria di Murano', 'Vetri e Cristalli' etc. (Ibid). Maraini was highly supportive of the various initiatives devoted to the development of the local industrial forces, and hoped to pressurise Professor Turner into including a section in the convention that was dedicated to the artistic glass of the Burano island. Moreover, the meeting was supposed to have had a sympathetic bias towards the spirit of the Biennale, to enhance the initiative (Ibid).

#### 4.13 The Biennale pavilion of decorative arts

As mentioned above, the Biennale decorative arts salon was opened in 1934. However, as an exhibition within the Biennale domain this was not an entirely new experiment. Every Exhibition of International Arts from 1903 onwards had contained a limited number of very important figurative artworks and decorative objects,<sup>303</sup> especially within foreign pavilions.<sup>304</sup>

In 1930, in collaboration with Monza's similar Triennale,<sup>305</sup> the Biennale executives arranged a special section of decorative objects called Goldsmith's International Salon, within the Exhibition of International Arts.<sup>306</sup> Managed by the Engineer Beppe Ravà, President of the *Istituto Veneto per il Lavoro e le Piccole Industrie* in Venice and vice-President of the *Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia Corporativa*, the initiative, designed to support local products, was a complete success both in terms of public response and sales.<sup>307</sup> Several gold and jewel producers participated, which included the *Scuola d'Arte Industriale Selvatico in Padua* and the *Società Italiana Argenterie e Posaterie di Alessandria*.<sup>308</sup>

In 1932, the Biennale administrative board aimed to welcome additional decorative disciplines to the XVIII exhibition, for which a special, brand new pavilion was to be completed by 1934. Arranged within the Biennale's main exhibition, the section contained limited, carefully chosen items that displayed the best examples of various Italian decorative disciplines, alongside selected foreign products. Maraini wrote in the preface of the XVIII Biennale catalogue that the scheme represented a remarkable effort to ensure the 'well being of the Venetian art and craft industries'.<sup>309</sup> The Biennale management board wanted the exhibition to focus on those fields in which local craftsmen excelled, such as glassware and

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<sup>303</sup> They included porcelains, ceramics, glassware, embroidery, tapestry, antique furniture, books and ornaments (Ibid, 'Padiglione arti decorative').

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> *Esposizione Triennale Internazionale delle Arti Decorative Industriali Moderne e dell'Architettura Moderna*.

<sup>306</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, 'Padiglione arti decorative'.

<sup>307</sup> Ojetti, 'La Mostra dell'Orafo alla XVII Biennale', *La Rivista di Venezia*, 1930.

<sup>308</sup> Ugo Nebbia, 'Gli orafi alla XVII Biennale Veneziana', *La Rivista di Venezia*, 1930.

<sup>309</sup> 'La XVIII Biennale di Venezia inaugurata alla presenza dei sovrani', *Il Corriere Padano*, 29 April 1932.

embroidery, as this would be advantageous for Venetian products over those of foreign industries. As the organisers insisted: 'Competition would surely work as stimulus for future improvement'.<sup>310</sup> However, only a very few foreign producers were invited, no doubt precisely to avoid that very competition.<sup>311</sup>

The press followed suit, Elio Zorzi reaffirming the value of traditional craft, in the prestigious *Rivista di Venezia*:

'One should not believe in the standardised art. An object is not beautiful if made with ten thousands other copies. It is not true that a social art can exist at a low cost and that this art can outstrip the most exclusive and luxurious one. The rarity of the object, the technique applied and the materials selected are an essential part of its beauty and desirability. Widespread distribution follow a successful form or trend but its development is not something symbolising genuine art'.<sup>312</sup>

Yet, within art circles, there was still a degree of confusion as to whether decorative arts should be considered real artworks or industrial products. The Biennale entourage maintained that decorative objects were true art forms excluding any 'industrial concept',<sup>313</sup> and that 'mercantilism should be left out',<sup>314</sup> while art *connoisseur* Ugo Nebbia declared the objects displayed at the XVIII Exhibition of International Arts to be of an 'eminently industrial character'.<sup>315</sup> By reaffirming the artistic nature of the exhibition, Biennale officials were trying to play down accusations of vulgar commercialism, and give artistic credibility to the event. In reality, industrial giants such as Lalique, Baccarat and Tiffany<sup>316</sup> were all participants at the XVIII Biennale, although they naturally claimed their products were authentic handicraft masterpieces, produced in a very limited numbers and therefore of genuine artistic merit. The evidence nevertheless suggests that 'pure' art was being increasingly overshadowed by the consumer commodity, with many

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, 'XVIII Biennale 1932'.

<sup>312</sup> Zorzi, 'Uno sguardo d'insieme alla XIX Biennale', *Rivista delle Arti*, May 1934.

<sup>313</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, 'XVIII Biennale 1932'.

<sup>314</sup> ASAC, Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. II, 01/01/32-06/07/34, session 7 December 1931.

<sup>315</sup> Nebbia, 'Gli orafi alla XVII Biennale Veneziana'.

<sup>316</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, 'Elenco ditte da invitare per la mostra del vetro'.

participating companies using the Biennale name for private advertisement.<sup>317</sup>

The Goldsmith's Salon of 1930 and the XVIII Biennale pioneered the way for the establishment of future decorative arts sections. Having proved a success, the Biennale executive committee began to seriously consider devoting an entire pavilion to traditional, local crafts.<sup>318</sup> At the Biennale committee meeting of 7 January 1932, Ravà discussed the need to build a proper base to host selected decorative arts. According to Ravà, this mirrored the interest of several Venetian institutions, such as the *Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia Corporativa*, the *Ente Nazionale per l'Artigianato e le Piccole Industrie*, the National Confederation of Industry and the municipality itself.

Volpi, speaking as a businessman, was of the opinion that the exhibition should take place annually and not every two years, with the pavilion being subsidised by those institutions directly interested in the event.<sup>319</sup> What is most notable is that the Biennale management, and Volpi above all, considered these exhibitions of decorative arts to be specifically designed for the benefit of the representatives of Venetian workshops and industries. This was reflected in the decorative arts pavilion being named *Venezia*, revealing the 'branding' strategy employed to exclude unwanted competition from the Milan Triennale.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> 'I visitatori della Biennale', *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 12 May 1934.

<sup>318</sup> 'La XVIII Biennale Veneziana inaugurata alla presenza dei sovrani', *Il Corriere Padano*, 29 April 1932. As early as 1929, Venetian notable Lionello Venturi had suggested that the Biennale host those works of art widely appealing to the tastes of the masses such as decorative products in separate sales pavilions as a marketing strategy (Venturi, *Pretesti di Critica*, Venezia, 1929).

<sup>319</sup> ASAC, Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. II, 01/01/32-06/07/34, session 7 January 1932. In fact, active contributions would come from industrial and commercial institutions, rather than artistic ones, such as the *Istituto Veneto per il Lavoro*, the *Consiglio Provinciale dell'Economia Corporativa*, the General Fascist Confederation of the Italian Industry and the Autonomous Fascist Federation of Italian Craftsmen (ASAC, Serie Materiale da Riordinare, 'Ufficio Stampa-Amministrazione 1936').

<sup>320</sup> ASAC, Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. II, 01/01/32-06/07/34, session 7 December 1931. The administrative board at the Milan Triennale had become increasingly alarmed about the forthcoming inauguration of a Biennale pavilion of decorative arts. At the start, the Milanese entourage was convinced that the exhibition would be of very limited proportions, and that the news of a whole salon of decorative objects was just an amplification of the press. It was fundamental for the Milan Triennale that the Venetian event did not invade its territory, especially in a period in which 'producers d[id] not score well' (Scotto Lavina, '1927, 1936', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia* 32, 82, p. 47). Nonetheless, competition would spring very soon between the two institutions (ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, 'Esposizione Triennale Internazionale delle Arti Decorative'). Maraini was of the opinion that the lack of a definite seat for the exhibition would give a valid pretext to the organisers of the Milan Triennale to impede any further edition of the Biennale Exhibition of Decorative Arts, and therefore

Additionally, in order to ensure that different crafts and handiworks all benefited, a rota prioritising different trades at every exhibition was developed.<sup>321</sup>

The Biennale Exhibition of Decorative Arts was finally inaugurated in 1934. Marla Stone describes how:

‘Glassware, textiles, lacework, gold smelting, enamel work, and brass work all became central to the Biennales of 1934 to 1942. In 1934, seventy-three decorative art exhibitors presented 422 objects. Modern glass designs by famous Venetian producers such as Venini and Saviati shared the Venezia pavilion with traditional lacework.’<sup>322</sup>

Needless to say, the executive committee, which included the Biennale leadership figures of Volpi, Maraini and Bazzoni,<sup>323</sup> promptly declared that the new event would support ‘the novel spirit of collaboration between artists and its institutions, as created by Fascism according to the Duce’s will’.<sup>324</sup> For Margaret Plant the desire for formal recognition from central government was obviously essential, yet, the primary target remained the enhancement of the economy:

‘From its inception in the nineteenth-century, the history of the international exhibition, artistic or industrial, had as a fundamental aim the promotion of national goods in the applied and fine arts. Whatever the distaste for aspects of Fascism, not least the symbiosis of art and war in Futurism, the official sanction of the Biennale ensured its survival and expansion, particularly in a time of economic depression’.<sup>325</sup>

By 1942, it seemed that the decorative arts salon had successfully accomplished this task, and the *Gazzetta di Messina* reported that the Biennale pavilions had successfully revived some traditional artistic schools, such as embroidery, ceramics, glassware, and carved wood, which had otherwise been in

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works on the new pavilion were accelerated (ASAC, Serie Verbali delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Ente Biennale, vol. II, 01/01/32-06/07/34, session 7 January 1932).

<sup>321</sup> Ibid, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 28 January 1935.

<sup>322</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 111.

<sup>323</sup> ASAC, Serie Scatole Nere, busta n. 63, ‘Mostra del vetro, merletto e ricamo, mosaico, ferro battuto’.

<sup>324</sup> ASAC, Maraini, ‘Introduzione’, Catalogo della XX Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d’Arte.

<sup>325</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 296.

serious danger of being outstripped by modern production methods.<sup>326</sup> Plant also makes the specific claim that in the 1920s and 1930s the Biennales stimulated ‘the progressive modernisation and creativity of the Murano glass industry’.<sup>327</sup>

However, the creation of a decorative arts pavilion was not solely intended to relieve economic depression, it also responded to a precise strategy to generate, within the Biennale, an alternative art market, aimed at a less wealthy public. As mentioned above, Volpi had quickly detected the economic trend that had led to the broadening of the market, and the creation of a consumer base including numerous middle class patrons. Less affluent buyers were seemingly drawn towards decorative objects that were both more affordable and accessible than the fine arts. The pavilion had been opened to attract precisely this kind of consumer, at a time when the private art market was acquiring more social and economic importance.

Registers for the 1934 Biennale reveal sales reaching 866,181 lire, of which private buyers accounted for 271,560 lire<sup>328</sup> and public buyers for 594,621 lire. The private art market contained about 150 individuals that spent around 1,810 lire each.<sup>329</sup> The introduction of decorative arts at the Biennale proved successful in expanding the number of buyers interested in less expensive art. In fact, out of 561 works sold, 197 were decorative objects mainly made of glass, crystal or textiles, with prices much lower than those to be found in the fine art pavilions. According to Stone, the new middle classes had been deterred from buying art by the cost, in addition to cultural and practical barriers. Paintings and sculptures at the Biennale had been too expensive for the non-collector or the non-elite consumer. In 1932 and 1934, painting prices ranged from 1,000 to 5,000 lire, while glassware and other decorative art pieces cost between 100 and 300 lire. After 1932, a visitor could attend the Biennale and purchase a Venetian glass vase for 125 lire.<sup>330</sup>

When, in the mid-1930s, the Biennale administrative board established that the exhibition of figurative arts would only host a few invited participants in order to dedicate the room to well-known, talented artists (see section 4.8), the same

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<sup>326</sup> Lucio Mangiarotti, ‘Maturità artistica del popolo italiano’, *La Gazzetta di Messina*, 27 June 1942.

<sup>327</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 299.

<sup>328</sup> The figure is slightly higher than 1932 but we must remember we are dealing with recession years.

<sup>329</sup> ASAC, Serie Registri Vendite, 1934.



marketing policy was adopted for the pavilion of decorative arts, in tune with the need to expand the commercial appeal of the institution. Few, capable decorative artists would have shared the salon to offer the best range of local production with the greatest commercial potential.<sup>331</sup> In this way, a Volpi-style, business rationality imposed itself at the Biennale: the wealthiest art lovers could focus on the limited products of the more prestigious and appealing ‘big names’ in the fine arts section, while the middle-classes could opt for less-expensive, decorative items. Rational thinking and marketing strategies facilitated the democratisation of art consumption, as middle-class buyers could now consider themselves genuine patrons of the arts. To conclude, the exhibitions of decorative arts organised in Venice in the 1920s and 1930s benefited Venetian economy in two ways. On the one hand, they helped to further the expansion of local productive capacity, while on the other, by offering more affordable items, they succeeded in widening the range of social classes who regularly bought art.

#### 4.14 Conclusions

The argument of this chapter developed from the starting observation that the Biennale was established in order to help relieve Venice’s economic problems long before Fascism had come to power. Even though the Biennale was assigned the role of co-ordinator of other national exhibitions and ideological ‘facilitator’ by the regime, the institution continued to retain its primary purpose of promoting tourism and the city of Venice during the years of Fascist government.

The fact that the exhibition, after 1922, was repackaged and extended to attract a wider audience was not understood by its organisers solely as a way of nationalising the masses, but also as a means of expanding the commercial appeal of the Biennale beyond the borders of elite cultural consumerism. This also exposed a trend in tune with the progressive growth of the art market, and the development of the practices of cultural tourism through the cultivation of modern tourist techniques.

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<sup>330</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, pp. 111-12.

<sup>331</sup> ASAC, Verbalì delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 14 April 1937.

From this perspective, if for Fascism, the 1930 decree recognizing the *Esposizione* served to put the institution under the control of the central authorities, for the Biennale administration, it represented the only viable solution to a series of financial problems for which the search for approval from the state was just another means of securing financial aid, binding up local aspirations with the power of the Fascist state.

This chapter has claimed that the Venice Biennale of International Arts, because of its inherent economic function, was a commercial institution cloaked in culture. The repertoires of the music festivals were cosmopolitan and largely appealing to the wider public rather than purely Fascist or even nationalist repertoires. Similarly, the Biennale promoted aesthetic diversification, not as a result of a Fascist policy in the artistic domain, but as an inherent desire of rendering the exhibition palatable to as broad an audience as possible. Stone's 'aesthetic pluralism' was more of a marketing strategy than a cultural or ideological practice.

Reforms and innovations implemented throughout the 1930s served the purpose of turning the Biennale into a truly commercial enterprise, capable of adjusting its artistic output in order to achieve the highest possible level of sales. This also prompted the exhibition to acquire the role of mediator within the art market, which had more to do with the need to match buyers and sellers rather than the embodiment of the role of 'cultural facilitator'. Decorative arts were introduced essentially to reinforce the Biennale's 'civic function' of supporting the Venetian economy, to widen its range of cultural offerings and to target less wealthy patrons. The Biennale was geared towards commercial values and the expansion of the private art market, a fact that in itself serves to explain the failure to develop a defined Fascist aesthetic and the failure of the Fascist competitions. Since artists had the chance to sell their works to private patrons, the necessary space was created for them to operate away from the constrictions and limitations of Fascist themes, ideology, and political control.

## 5. Serving Tourist Purposes: the Lido Beach Resort and the Biennale Film Festival

The history of the Lido<sup>1</sup> and the Cinema Festival provides another striking example of the progressive commodification and exploitation of cultural tourism in the Venetian lagoon during the 1930s. From an impoverished and declining area destined for the poorer classes in the nineteenth century, the Lido was transformed with the implementation of a novel urban plan aimed at rejuvenating the site through the promotion of elite tourism. To this end, popular diversions were confined to a distant part of the island, while upper class leisure facilities were established at the heart of the Lido resort. The prospect of new reforms of this kind fitted perfectly with Volpi's concept of *La Grande Venezia*<sup>2</sup> and was understood as part of a programme of urban planning where the beach resort would form the glamorous attachment to the historic town. In this light, Venice and the Lido would be centres for the exploitation of culture and tourism, while industrial activities were concentrated at Porto Marghera. Within two decades of the end of World War I, the Lido had been transformed into a cosmopolitan beach resort,<sup>3</sup> eventually emerging as an elegant tourist destination of international standing, which, to a large extent escaped increased national autarky and state regulation, reaching a balance between Fascist ideology and cosmopolitanism.

This chapter seeks to show how the establishment of the Cinema Festival in 1932 made a major contribution to the revitalization of the Lido, after it found itself in dire economic straits as a result of the First World War. In its early years, the festival stood out as a purely local business, a product of the hotel industry's ambitions represented by Volpi and the Ciga, and exemplified by the construction of the Cinema Palace in 1937. In that period, the event was clearly regarded as a means of boosting tourism in the Venetian area, more than an agent of cultural change: it was designed to prolong the tourist season rather than developing the

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<sup>1</sup> The Lido di Venezia is an islet part of the *Comune di Venezia*.

<sup>2</sup> According to journalist Giuseppe Ghigi, when founding the Cinema Palace, Volpi primarily took into consideration the Lido's interests and the project of *La Grande Venezia* (Ghigi, 'Eccellenze, signore e signori...', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. XV).

<sup>3</sup> Zucconi (ed.), *La Grande Venezia*, p. 175.

new cinematic art form. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that a clear Fascist policy towards cinema was slow to emerge, and Fascist authorities took no real interest in the festival until the intervention of the Ministry for the Press and Propaganda in 1936.

In an increasingly close relationship with Venice, the Lido was soon celebrating a golden age with the launch of theatres, amusement parks, golf courses, aquariums, swimming pools and other leisure facilities. In particular, the establishment of a municipal casino as a permanent feature upon the Venetian cultural landscape highlights how the gaming industry was put at the service of cultural tourism, welfare and society in such a way as to overcome any difficulties stemming from the moral ambiguities of gambling. This reinforces the thesis that tourism, entertainment and culture were inextricably bound up within the programme of economic revitalization.

### **5.1 The birth of the Lido as modern holidaying resort: from tourism of the poor to elite tourism**

This section explores the shift of the Lido's economic priorities in the 1920s, from providing leisure activities for the poorer classes to welcoming a tourism of the social elites which redefined the island as an exclusive, cosmopolitan beach resort, and fulfilled plans of development of cultural tourism as seen in the project of *La Grande Venezia* (see chapter 3).

It was only around the mid-nineteenth century that urbanisation on a significant scale began to manifest itself in the Lido area, a process that would continue to accelerate towards the turn of the century. In tourist terms, the island developed a distinctive dual identity: on the one hand, it was an international beach resort; on the other, a holiday suburb for the people of Venice.<sup>4</sup> The opening of the first bathing establishment in 1833 marked the birth of the modern Lido and the father can be said to have been Giovanni Busetto, nicknamed 'Fisola'. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Busetto had begun to acquire different estates at the Lido, forming an extensive property from what was then the *Ospedale al*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

*Mare* (the marine hospital), to the north, as far as the Excelsior Hotel.<sup>5</sup> According to Plant, 'still sparsely populated and under military restrictions, the island became part of the *Comune di Venezia* in 1883, when the bathing industry was being established (...). In 1899, Ettore Sorger, one of the main developers of the area, succeeded in effecting the transfer of military lands to the Commune'.<sup>6</sup>

From that point onwards, the Lido underwent a series of public works which greatly accelerated the process of urbanisation, and helped to define the elitist character of the island.<sup>7</sup> Luxury holiday facilities were administered by a 'leading consortium', combining local entrepreneurs and municipal government. The 1905 construction of an electrical supply line from the lagoon to the beach and the new aqueduct further 'increased the potential of the area'.<sup>8</sup> The *Società dei Bagni* and then the *Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi* (Ciga) succeeded Busetto as proprietors of the area, continuing the same development policies as their predecessor.<sup>9</sup>

It was the Ciga, established in March 1906, or more accurately, the efforts one of its directors, Nicolò Spada, a sort of modern Fisola, that firmly imprinted a particular image of exclusivity upon the new Lido. Thanks to the new sea front developments and the elegant hotels, complete with private beach facilities and parks, the island emerged from the provincialism which had hitherto characterised it.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the pace of development of the Lido was remarkable in the early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> According to Margaret Plant, Spada and Sorger combined to oversee the establishment of the Hotel Excelsior, with Sorger also instrumental in the project to extend the promenade, the *Lungo Mare*, as far as the new hotel. The stunning and luxurious Excelsior, devised by Giovanni Sardi, 'was opened on 20 July 1908, watched by a crowd reported to be thirty-thousand strong, and it was to remain at the centre of Venetian social life until the Second World War'.<sup>12</sup> For

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<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Triani, '1932, l'age d'or di una spiaggia da cinema', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 257.

<sup>7</sup> Zucconi (ed.), *La Grande Venezia*, p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 257.

<sup>9</sup> Zucconi (ed.), *La Grande Venezia*, p. 183.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 234.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pp. 257-8.

journalist Giorgio Triani it embodied the best example of the highest degree of comfort and elegance, nature and glamour, health and sport within a single seaside resort.<sup>13</sup>

At the beginning of the century, the island was already well on its way to becoming the maritime leisure capital of Italy. In the first place, for Triani, a new 'maritime order' was established at the Lido, at the centre of which was the new fashion for sunbathing. Hitherto, the sun had been considered to be the enemy of the fashionable white complexion and seaside activities were more frequently undertaken as part of a period of convalescence or medical prescription.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, these natural elements tended to be viewed as remedies for diseases associated with the poorer classes. For sufferers from rickets, scrofula, tuberculosis and other respiratory maladies, clinics and hospices were located within the seafront hospitals and the convalescent resorts.<sup>15</sup> As a result, Venetian hospitals had come to assume an important place amongst the medical institutions of Europe for their role in the physical and moral recovery of the needy.<sup>16</sup> This phenomenon helped to define a 'tourism of the poor', and the Marine Hospital, built in 1868, actually constituted something of an obstacle to the construction of the glamorous Lido image. Consequently, the exclusion of the sick and the poor came to be seen as a prerequisite to the development of the more prestigious forms of tourism which the local authorities sought to promote. Accordingly, the future of seaside hospitals began to come under threat from the new establishments such as 'Des Bains' and the 'Excelsior' which were dependent on an elite clientele.<sup>17</sup> A type of exclusive international tourism was about to replace the traditional leisure activities of the lower classes: as the Marine Hospital represented an obstruction to this, the hotel industry set out to eliminate the problem.

In 1908, after the inauguration of the Excelsior Palace,<sup>18</sup> the Ciga proposed

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<sup>13</sup> Triani, '1932, l'age d'or', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 49. Medical practitioners were of course aware that the vitamin deficiencies that caused ailments such as rickets could be treated through exposure to the sun, and the Venetian Lido was thus a perfectly suited site for recuperation (Ibid).

<sup>16</sup> Zucconi (ed.), *La Grande Venezia*, p. 178.

<sup>17</sup> Triani, '1932, l'age d'or', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> The typical hotel clientele included barons, princesses and elegant dames (Ghigi, 'L'olimpiade del Cinema', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 21).

to relocate the Maritime Hospital, which stood right beside an ex-fortress named 'Forte delle Quattro Fontane', opposite the site of the hotel. A decision had been taken to facilitate the unfettered growth of elite tourism at the Lido, whilst relegating the institutions associated with the 'tourism of the poor' to the rear of the island, in an area named S. Nicolò. An assembly of patrons at the hospital authorized the president of the board of directors, Pietro Calzavara, to take the Ciga's relocation project into consideration, and a legal-technical committee was appointed to study the viability of the scheme. Calzavara later outlined the details of the plan to the board. Overall expenses amounted to 525,000 lire of which 300,000 lire were to be provided, together with the costs of the new location for the Hospital, by the Ciga.<sup>19</sup> In the event, the outbreak of war in 1914 delayed the implementation of the scheme and in 1919, the Marine Hospital and the *Bagno Popolare* were still to be found in their original sites. After the war, the number of the wounded grew higher, and the sick and disabled were far more visible at the Lido. This provided new impetus to the project, and the decision was finally taken to build a new hospital. On 6 October 1921, the foundation stone was laid, and the new building was inaugurated the following year.<sup>20</sup>

While the 'tourism of the poor' was confined to S. Nicolò, elite tourism gradually opened up to newly emerging social classes. According to Triani, the 1920s signified a profound shift in the socio-cultural character of the holiday-going and leisure-oriented public. No longer were seaside holidays the exclusive preserve of the aristocratic families who dictated taste and fashion. Now, the upper bourgeoisie, intellectuals and artists were increasingly important consumers of leisure activities, and for these groups, the sun and sea represented amusement rather than a medicinal remedy or health treatment.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the fact that many of the improved facilities and new amenities were geared towards the attraction of a tourist trade drawn from the European elites, the local authorities also began to offer benefits and sea cures for the average

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<sup>19</sup> Rizzi (ed.), 'The first post-war period', *Lido di oggi, Lido di allora*, anno I, n. 1, August 1987, p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> Triani, '1932, l'age d'or', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

family,<sup>22</sup> indicating that the municipality was in favour of cultivating forms of tourism open to a wider range of social classes.<sup>23</sup> In 1932, for example, the Podestà ordered the construction of another popular bathing establishment at San Nicolò di Lido. Part of the estate included in this project was to be the location of a pavilion to be used as a hostel for war orphans.<sup>24</sup> At the end of 1933, the *Comune* granted additional land on the shore to the Marine Hospital in San Nicolò in order to complete the newly constructed popular bathing establishment and to improve amenities.<sup>25</sup> In subsequent years, it created first aid sites along the beach, built new cabins and improved transport connections within the island.<sup>26</sup> Prices at the communal bathing establishment included quotas in favour of the marine colonies for veterans and the seriously wounded.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the town council regularly issued grants for the poor in need of sea cures at the Lido.<sup>28</sup> It made sure that boat fares to the island were accessible to the lower middle class family, and also established a subsidised transport service to the Lido for the sick and disabled.<sup>29</sup> According to the Podestà, it was necessary 'to promote initiatives in the demographic sector, following the directives laid down by the Duce'. Children in particular were to benefit from fare reductions. 'After all', said Count Paolo Foscari, 'fares cannot be increased but they can be reduced, we must follow the

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<sup>22</sup> It has to be noted, however, that those facilities catering for the lower classes were sharply divided from those offered to the bourgeoisie.

<sup>23</sup> AMV, Verbalì delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 14 November 1928. Not surprisingly, the debate upon whether to make the Lido an exclusive beach resort had been alive since the end of the 1920s. For example, in 1928, during one of the town council meetings, councillor Toffano spoke out about the problems of the Lido. He believed that foreigners were going less often to the Lido because of serious competition from other seaside resorts. According to Toffano, the resort was in a very fortunate location, so close to Venice, it was important therefore to transform it into one of the most beautiful beaches in Europe. To achieve the target, it was vital that the population of Venice left the Lido to wealthy foreigners. 'At the Lido', insisted Toffano, 'one should not see any homeless people hanging around, at least the central area should be reserved to the rich tourist while the rest of the population should be confined to San Nicolò (the new site of the Marine Hospital) and Alberoni'. Councillors Musatti and Brass, however, were in disagreement about the possibility of turning the Lido into an exclusive holidaying spot, believing that locals had the same right to enjoy the beach and sea cures as anyone else (*Ibid*).

<sup>24</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Costruzione di un nuovo bagno popolare a San Nicolò di Lido', trim. I, 1933, n. 278.

<sup>25</sup> AMV, Verbalì delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 27 January 1933.

<sup>26</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Lido. Sistemazione posti di pronto soccorso nelle zone balneari comunali', trim. I, 1936, n. 898.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 'Turismo. Sovraprezzo capanne balneari comunali a favore delle colonie alpine e marine combattenti e mutilati', trim. I, 1933, n. 679.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 'Sussidi ai poveri bisognosi di cure elio-marine', trim. I, 1931, n. 2568.



Duce's will of 'going towards the people', towards numerous families'.<sup>30</sup>

The *Fascio di Lido* together with the *Unione dei Commercianti* also proved willing to contribute to the development of the island's tourist potential. They therefore decided to provide additional funds to the tune of 1,500 lire for the improvement of facilities intended 'to make the Lido an important tourist centre'.<sup>31</sup> In 1939, despite the approaching war, vice-Podestà Rocca argued that because of 'the constant tourist growth' which the Lido had undergone in recent decades, it was necessary to acquire additional coastal space to enlarge the popular bathing establishment, and meet the expectations of the numerous families holidaying at the Lido. An agreement was subsequently signed with the military authorities, which had been using part of the coastline coveted by the municipality.<sup>32</sup>

This section has exposed the emerging tensions between popular tourism and elite tourism, and between the hotel industry (keen to cater for the latter) and the needs of the lower classes. These frictions were reflected in divisions within the local municipality, with some members far keener than others to see the development of mass tourism alongside elite tourism in the Lido. The final result was the appearance in the Lido of a patchwork of geographically distinct areas serving different economic functions.

## **5.2 Building an elite resort: the Venice Cinema Festival and the tourist industry**

According to Maurizio Rebershak, there was a shift in the prestige of the Lido in 1920 on to a national scale, and soon afterwards, in 1923, to a sphere of international prominence.<sup>33</sup> In the second half of the 1920s, the island reached the pinnacle of its international fame as a site of elite tourism, and had come to be considered as synonymous with modernisation and progress in the Veneto region.<sup>34</sup> According to Margaret Plant, 'the Lido was instantly successful as an extension of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 'Servizio trasporto accidentati al Lido di Venezia', trim. II, 1939, n. 1873.

<sup>30</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 21 December 1938.

<sup>31</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Attrezzatura turistica di Lido. Storno di fondi', trim. III, 1938, n. 1859.

<sup>32</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 20 December 1939.

<sup>33</sup> Rebershak, 'Gli uomini capitali', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1258.

<sup>34</sup> Zucconi (ed.), *La Grande Venezia*, p. 183.

the busy social season played out in the palaces along the Grand Canal'.<sup>35</sup>

The municipality worked hard to ensure that the Lido could meet the most demanding standards of elite tourism. 'A full-blown advertising campaign accompanied the modern invention of the Lido, lauding its unique provision of the most modern facilities combined with a historical city across the water'.<sup>36</sup> Numerous reports about the tourist season at the Lido were included in famous Italian magazines and reviews, ensuring that the seaside spot became associated in the public mind with the names of dignitaries and aristocrats. At the same time, however, such coverage suggested that the resort was largely the preserve of the wealthy elite.<sup>37</sup>

During the post-war period the popularity of the Lido expanded dramatically. It was said that

'Everybody seemed in a fever to parade himself, to spend money, to enjoy himself...at the Excelsior Palace Hotel one could not count the number of princes, dukes, counts, marquises and barons; but there were a lot of 'commentatori' or simple 'signori': they were the nouveaux riches who were often surrounded by beautiful women'.<sup>38</sup>

The international prestige achieved by the Lido, which lasted until 1935, the year of the League of Nations sanctions for the invasion of Ethiopia, was the result of increasingly close attention being paid to the facilities of the resort.<sup>39</sup> In the 1920s, Lido residents witnessed the construction of numerous hotels, mansions and small villas which were often built in the most recent and fashionable architectural styles. The intention to allow the island to compete with international resorts for a cosmopolitan clientele was self-evident, and this objective was pursued through the creation of numerous new facilities and attractions, from landscaped gardens and sporting facilities to the enhancement of the popular bathing establishments.<sup>40</sup>

The aim was also to endow the Lido with an array of maritime facilities not

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<sup>35</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 269.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 258.

<sup>37</sup> Rizzi (ed.), 'The first post-war period', p. 45.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 46.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

found elsewhere: in particular, beach houses and shelters reserved for customers of the Ciga were real islands of comfort. The quality of service was deliberately luxurious so as to attract the highest class and wealthiest of customers.<sup>41</sup> In 1926, the 'Chez-Vous' at the Excelsior Palace, one of the most elegant dance halls in the world, was inaugurated and, at the same time, the new tennis courts upon which the new International Tennis Tournament was played were opened.<sup>42</sup> It was during these years that attempts to imitate the Venetian beach resort in other parts of Italy were made, the most obvious examples being Viareggio or Forte dei Marmi.<sup>43</sup>

Again, public and private investments made throughout the 1920s were part of a unique strategic design: the Volpian project of *La Grande Venezia*.<sup>44</sup> The Lido was becoming the glamorous tourist complement to historic Venice, with the maritime aspect being the real appeal of the holiday, providing the perfect combination of sunbathing, nature, sports and the artistic, cultural and historical attractions. This combination of nature and culture was to be placed at the heart of the promotional campaigns<sup>45</sup> to popularise Venice and the Lido amongst a national

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<sup>41</sup> Triani, '1932, l'age d'or', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 51. We only have to think that the company managed a number of activities in the island amongst which we find the bathing establishment named *Grande Stabilimento Bagni*, seaside shelters at the hotel *Des Bains* and *Quattro Fontane*, the hotel *Excelsior*, the hotel *Palazzo del Mare*, the hotel *Alberoni*, villas, parks, tennis and golf courts, a bar at the Nicelli airport, parkings, stores, dormitories, factory buildings, apartments, kiosks, garages, greenhouses, laundries, and tramcars. The Ciga managed hotels at the Lido, in Venice, Rome, Naples, Milan, Stresa, and Florence (Camera di Commercio, Industria e Artigianato di Venezia, Registro Ditte, I Fascicolo, n. 4905, 'Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi').

<sup>42</sup> Triani, '1932, l'age d'or', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 53.

<sup>43</sup> Rizzi (ed.), 'The first post-war period', p. 48.

<sup>44</sup> Triani, '1932, l'age d'or', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 49.

<sup>45</sup> For example, on 16 July 1932, Alfredo Campione, manager at the Ciga, informed the Prefect of Venice that in those days, the *Istituto Nazionale LUCE*, following directives issued from the central government, was producing a film on the life of the Lido; a movie which constituted, according to Campione, a 'terrific means of propaganda for the seaside resort' (ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 44, busta 'Stazioni balneari e invernali. Disposizioni di massima. Tutela della moralità'). Therefore, the Podestà ordered the town council to contribute to the costs of a promotional movie featuring Venice and the Lido that was to be filmed towards the end of June 1934 and publicised in the review *LUCE*. This contribution would be taken from those funds earmarked for the development of tourism. Because a film of this type was usually very expensive, the Ciga offered to cover half of the costs. Of the various scenes, only those believed to have 'propagandistic' potential (intended as publicity potential) were chosen (AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Contributo all'Istituto Nazionale LUCE per la ripresa e programmazione di un film propaganda su Lido e Venezia', trim. III, 1934, n. 1448). Later, the G.U.F. of Venice contacted the Prefect informing him that the *Direzione Generale per il Turismo* had instituted a competition for local films promoting tourism to be screened in America and Germany as commercial propaganda for Venice and the Lido. The G.U.F. also requested a contribution from the Province of

and international public.<sup>46</sup>

However, Venice and the Lido suffered badly from the prolonged depression, and previous chapters have already examined a number of the ways in which the town authorities attempted to stimulate a Venetian economic recovery through the promotion of tourism, thereby mitigating the worst effects of the global slump. Statistics provided by the Chamber of Commerce reveal that the tourist boom in the Lido had peaked during the mid-1920s, and that by the end of the decade numbers were in decline:<sup>47</sup>

	<u>1923</u>	<u>1924</u>	<u>1925</u>	<u>1926</u>	<u>1927</u>	<u>1928</u>	<u>1929</u>	<u>1930</u>	<u>1931</u>
<b>Tourist Arrivals</b>	47,183	55,365	62,444	52,731	49,240	46,380	45,999	42,668	32,556
<b>Total Population</b>	171,611	195,236	203,009	172,338	115,048	146,692	136,737	128,304	99,766

By 1931 arrivals at the Lido were almost half the number they had been in 1925.<sup>48</sup> In a meeting in 1928, the *Consulta Municipale* concluded that any

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Venice to allow the city to participate in 'such a useful competition' (ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 4, busta 'Pellicole cinematografiche di produzione nazionale. Programmazione').

<sup>46</sup> Zucconi (ed.), *La Grande Venezia*, p. 180.

<sup>47</sup> Camera di Commercio, Industria e Artigianato di Venezia, Registro Ditte, I Fascicolo, n. 4905, 'Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi'.

<sup>48</sup> Examination of the performance of the Ciga in the interwar period, indicates that soon after the First World War the economic situation at the Lido improved greatly and the mid-1920s represented the peak of the Ciga's fortunes, while profits suddenly declined towards the 1930s:

<u>1925</u>	<u>1926</u>	<u>1927</u>	<u>1928</u>	<u>1929</u>	<u>1930</u>	<u>1931</u>	<u>1932</u>
9,520,000	8,700,000	4,348,560	6,530,000	6,260,000	6,000,000	11,309	62,348 *

\*: figures are expressed in lire

In 1925, the company's revenues had reached an enormous 9,520,000 lire (Camera di Commercio, Industria e Artigianato di Venezia, Registro Ditte, I Fascicolo, n. 4905, 'Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi. Bilancio 1925'). Such success in the tourist field was partly explained by the recent construction of the *Palazzo dell'Esposizione di Ca' Pesaro* at the Lido. The Ca' Pesaro exhibition traditionally hosted those artists that had been previously rejected by the Biennale and because of its role as a cultural-tourist attraction we can consider it an antecedent of the Cinema Festival. It is not coincidence that the relevant pavilion was financed by the Ciga which considered the *Ca' Pesaro* institution as 'a business which [could] greatly enhance the commercial profile of the Lido' (Ibid, 'Verbale di Assemblea, 8 April 1926'). In 1926, the Lido had established itself as a world-renowned seaside resort, to the extent that the summer season at the moment now represented the most important period of business for the Ciga. However, profits began to fall (perhaps due to the impact of the revaluation of the lira) until on the eve of the global economic meltdown, when the Ciga's administrative board claimed that both economic growth and tourist numbers were in decline,

economically sensible policy had to be directed towards reviving the tourist industry in the Lido.<sup>49</sup> In fact, and as a direct result of the kind of thinking described above, while Venice was going through a period of deep depression, the development and subsequent transformation of the district actually accelerated during those years.<sup>50</sup> The economic crisis which took hold in the early 1930s might even be said to have had a beneficial effect upon the tourist facilities of the Lido, in the sense that it forced modernisation and reform upon the hotel industry in order to maximise the resort's appeal. In this, the local authorities were assisted by the fact that the Lido had for some time been regarded as an area providing outstanding business and investment opportunities.<sup>51</sup>

The *Banca Commerciale Italiana*, unsurprisingly given the influence of Volpi, contributed financially to many of the speculative business projects conducted, and the Ciga itself was heavily involved in several enterprises.<sup>52</sup> The hotel industry and the Ciga in particular wished above all to promote an elite tourism, not only in traditional terms but also drawing upon the newly fashionable leisure and sporting activities.<sup>53</sup> The company was also closely involved in supporting the First International Festival of the Cinema at the Excelsior Hotel, perhaps the high point of the process of the cultural industrialization of the Lido in the inter-war period.<sup>54</sup>

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and the corporation had been forced to lower prices at its hotels. In 1930, the Ciga's balance was 6 million lire (Ibid, 'Bilancio 1930'), while in 1931 the situation had dramatically worsened with profits falling to just 11,309 lire (Ibid, 'Bilancio 1931'). The tourist industry was now in a parlous state, and statistics reveal that numbers visiting the Lido had fallen by 23% and resident tourists by 21% compared to 1930. In particular, the number of American tourists had diminished by 40% from 1930 levels. Overall, incomes from tourism fell by about 40%, a potentially disastrous contraction (Ibid, 'Verbale di Assemblea, 31 March 1932').

<sup>49</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 14 November 1928.

<sup>50</sup> Triani, '1932, l'age d'or', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 27. As an example, the bridge across the lagoon which was built precisely to improve the connection between the island and the mainland was inaugurated on 25 March 1933 (Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 283). This embodied a project designed to enhance the 'character' of the Lido into an entertainment island for the 'bel mondo' with Venice, a city of culture, art and history at its heart (Triani, '1932, l'age d'or', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 27).

<sup>51</sup> Zucconi (ed.), *La Grande Venezia*, p. 180.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 183.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 185.

<sup>54</sup> Triani, '1932, l'age d'or', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 56. As early as 1914 the Ciga had played a key role in launching a competition for the construction of forty luxury cottages located between the Hotel Des Bains and the Excelsior Palace, and between the 1920s and 1930s, the company had emerged as the single biggest force for the promotion of urbanisation at the

In the 1930s, a series of public works of urban regeneration were undertaken in the Lido, a development that helped to redefine not just the image of the Venetian resort, but also the essential character of the modern seaside destination. Gino Damerini, during a meeting of the town council, drove home the point that if the Lido was to survive in a competitive international tourist market, significant restructuring and renovation was required in order to ensure that the resort came up to international standards. Up to that point, he argued, the municipality had tended to neglect these needs.<sup>55</sup> However, Damerini was perhaps being somewhat unfair on the efforts of the local authorities. As early as 1928, the local administration had completed a major program of road building and maintenance across the entirety of the island, from the area of S. Nicolò and Ca' Bianca on one hand, towards the Alberoni on the other.<sup>56</sup> In 1934, the new popular bathing establishment built one year before, was enlarged and improved so as to cater for all the tourists coming to the Lido for their vacations,<sup>57</sup> while the facilities and capacity of the Nicelli airport were expanded with the construction of another passenger terminal.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, the development of the resort's transport infrastructure continued apace, with the Ciga taking control of the bus service running throughout the island after 1925,<sup>59</sup> and a connection was established with the other islets of the lagoon in the 1930s. In 1937, after the Venetian boat fleet had been restored, a nightly boat service was arranged between the Lido and Venice.<sup>60</sup> By 1939, the town council had also started an additional service between the Lido, Murano and the Giudecca island.<sup>61</sup>

At the beginning of the 1930s, the Lido became the focus of a series of summer entertainments called 'Estate Veneziana' which included events such as the

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Lido (Zucconi (ed.), *La Grande Venezia*, p. 185).

<sup>55</sup> AMV, Verbalì delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 14 November 1928.

<sup>56</sup> Vittorio Moraffi, 'Lavori stradali al Lido dal 1928 ad oggi', *La Rivista di Venezia*, January 1930.

<sup>57</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Turismo. Ampliamento del Bagno Popolare al Lido', trim. I, 1934, n. 207.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 'Aeroporto Lido. Costruzione di una stazione passeggeri', trim. II, 1934, n. 1162.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 'Definizione pendenze con la Ciga per contributi autocorriera Lido-Alberoni', trim. II, 1923, n. 1557.

<sup>60</sup> AMV, Verbalì delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 24 June 1937.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, session 18 October 1939.

International Congress of Navigation presided over by Giovanni Giuriati, as well as the International Boat Racing, tennis and golf tournaments. For these and other cultural and sporting events, the Minister of Communications ordered rail fare reductions of 30% and 50% upon return tickets.<sup>62</sup> For the Podestà, these celebrations contributed to the development of the tourist movement towards the *Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo* (Tourist Office),<sup>63</sup> and he set out to increase funds to finance summer entertainments.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, the Ciga had begun a major advertising campaign on behalf of the tourist industry in the Lido within the main Italian reviews and magazines, in order to popularise the beach resort among a wider national and international public.<sup>65</sup> The Ciga also sponsored the participation of the Lido in the most prestigious tourist fairs in Italy, the General Exhibition in Nice and the Milan Fair.<sup>66</sup>

In 1932, with hotel managers bemoaning the decline of tourism in the Lido,<sup>67</sup> Volpi and Maraini sought more ways in which new forms of leisure activity

<sup>62</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Estate Veneziana 1931. Spese per pubblicità e organizzazione', trim. II, 1931, n. 1067.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Spesa per festeggiamenti al Lido', trim. II, 1933, n. 985.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Maggiore spesa per festeggiamenti al Lido', trim. III, 1932, n. 1810.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Propaganda sui giornali Italiani durante la stagione balneare estiva', trim. III, 1934, n. 1411.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Partecipazione all'Esposizione Generale di Nizza e alla Fiera di Milano', trim. I, 1935, n. 224.

<sup>67</sup> Documents held at the Chamber of Commerce in Venice reinforce the thesis that the Cinema Festival at the Lido was the product of tourist development and economic interests. As the Lido prospered in the first twenty years of the century so did the Ciga, which, under the influence of Giuseppe Volpi expanded from a local enterprise to a corporation of national significance (Reberschak, 'Gli uomini capitali', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 1278). Indeed, it is fair to say that the well-being of the Ciga rested upon economic growth of the seaside resort. In 1932, recession had hit the Lido hard, and the Ciga's profits stood at just 62,348 lire (Camera di Commercio, Industria e Artigianato di Venezia, Registro Ditte, I Fascicolo, n. 4905, 'Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi. Bilancio 1932'). The world crisis had taken its toll and incomes stagnated while the tourist numbers fell by another 20%, primarily because of the continuing collapse in the trade from North America. The administrative board bemoaned the international political situation and the tendency of many nations to raise significant tariff barriers against foreign competition. Italy, by way of contrast, in its tourist policies at least, had pursued a relatively liberal outlook, without any major limitations or restrictions towards travellers who wished to go abroad, thereby, it was hoped, providing a good example to other countries. Managers also drew attention to the Italian tourists returning to Venice, believing this development to be indicative of an important new internal tourist trend, and 'the attraction that Fascism exert[ed] over Italians' (Ibid, 'Verbale di Assemblea, 22 March 1933'). In 1933, the financial position of the Ciga had radically improved, partly as a result of the attention that the new Film Festival was drawing to the Lido. The primary function of the new festival as a means to rehabilitate the declining tourist economy was apparently bearing fruit, and in 1933 the Ciga's profits had risen to three million lire (Ibid, 'Bilancio 1933'). In 1934, profits fell slightly to 2,549,257 lire (Ibid, 'Bilancio 1934'). Despite the economic crisis, it

could be exploited to the benefit of mass tourism. That year, Volpi declared: 'We could make an attempt with the cinema, this entertainment is flourishing right now and it is interesting to consider whether it would be able to attract the same numbers that currently attend football matches. The presence of these visitors could revitalize the Lido and the hotels. They represent a cost for us, and are used only by the exclusive type of tourist; they could be active also during months like August and September (...). The cinema has a future, even if its founder, Lumière, declared that it could never be commercial'.<sup>68</sup>

Thereafter, Volpi, with his major interests within the Ciga,<sup>69</sup> acted as a consistent advocate for a new Biennale Exhibition of International Cinematographic Art at the company's Palace Hotel Excelsior. Volpi had been told that at the Lido there were no cinema halls to host the festival but he concluded that the garden of the 'luminous fountains' at the Excelsior would be suitable. The cinema exhibition was thus inaugurated at the beginning of August 1932, with the immediate result that the hotels enjoyed a substantial increase in business.<sup>70</sup> From the beginning, therefore, this event reversed the decline of tourism in the Lido, and

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was significant that for the Ciga the tourist season had been highly successful, due to the new initiatives organized by the Biennale entourage. The Cinema Festival had made a major contribution to the revitalization of the tourist season at the Lido and to the benefit of the financial position of the Ciga (Ibid, 'Verbale di Assemblea, 7 April 1937'). In 1935, profits fell again to 2,103,500 lire (Ibid, 'Bilancio 1935'). However, they were still much higher than those of 1932, when the Cinema Festival had started, meaning that the overall picture was not as worrying as a number of years earlier (Ibid, 'Verbale di Assemblea, 14 April 1936').

<sup>68</sup> Rizzi (ed.), 'Il Lido e la Mostra del Cinema', *Lido di oggi*, anno XII, n. 12, August 1999, p. 147.

<sup>69</sup> Giuseppe Volpi was not only the president of the Ente Biennale after 1930, but also the chief executive at the Ciga from 1917 and president from 1922 (Camera di Commercio, Industria e Artigianato di Venezia, Registro Ditte, I Fascicolo, n. 4905, 'Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi. Movimento Personale anni 1930-45'). In 1926, when Volpi took up his official appointment with the government in Rome, the Ciga administrative board announced: 'On July of last year, Senator Count Volpi di Misurata, appointed Minister of Finances, resigned from the post of administrative manager in our company. We regret the loss of Giuseppe Volpi's experience at the Ciga, nonetheless, this is made up for to some extent by the great achievements and progress made during his tenure of the post. Let us not forget the deals established with foreign countries which have brought great advantages to our industry and the tourist movement in general' (Ibid, 'Verbale di Assemblea, 8 April 1926'). Three of the administrative managers at the Ciga, Alfredo Campione Vittorio Cini and Antonio Revedin were also members of the town council in the 1920s and 1930s. Usually, their interventions during meetings aimed at defending the interests of the Venetian tourist industries. It was Revedin, for example, who insisted upon the lowering of the *Tassa di Soggiorno* duty imposed upon the customers of Venetian hotels in order to relieve the crisis that had hit the industry in the post-war period (AMV, Verbalì delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 14 November 1928).

<sup>70</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbalì delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 30 January 1943.



contributed to the attraction of large numbers of visitors to the resort, proving to be so successful that it was quickly established as an annual event. Volpi specifically argued for continuing to stage it at the Lido because of his concern that the Lido was 'tired',<sup>71</sup> and in need of fresh initiatives. The launch of the Film Festival represented a significant step to promote the island as an internationally renowned beach resort. According to Volpi, the Lido had been chosen as the seat of the festival instead of Venice, 'as cinema [was] made, or should be made, of sun and youth'.<sup>72</sup> Locating the event within the most luxurious hotel at the Lido further clarified the Biennale's developing identity as a site of consumption, tourism and leisure. Margaret Plant, arguing very much along these lines, has observed that

'Although Antonio Maraini claimed to have invented the idea of the Cinema Biennale, so too did Volpi, whose control of industry, culture, tourism and the press was awesome. The new venture was propitiously timed at the point when the 'talkies' were a novelty and the new star system was building. Cleverly scheduled for the height of summer, it was located not in old Venice or the Giardini, but in Volpi's territory on the Lido, at the Excelsior Hotel, which provided an outdoor screening area, grand accommodation and the showcase of the beach at the same time. The Lido was an international meeting place for film stars in these glamour years, and has continued to be so'.<sup>73</sup>

The idea of putting together an international festival of films of 'high artistic quality' in the language of their country of origin and free from the interference of the censor was already well established by the 1930s.<sup>74</sup> The Venetian Film Festival

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<sup>71</sup> As cited in Francesco Bolzoni, 'Correva l'anno decimo...', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 111.

<sup>72</sup> As cited in Ghigi, 'L'olimpiade del cinema', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 22: Dario Sabatello, 'La grande rassegna internazionale', *Il Tevere*, 9 August 1932.

<sup>73</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 301. In fact, the Ciga hotels had constituted the glamorous side of the Biennale since the early 1920s. A 1928 article outlined how representatives of the foreign press, after a visit to the *Esposizione*, had been invited to relax at the Lido's beaches, enjoying the facilities offered at the Hotel Des Bains. At night, dinner was served at the Excelsior Palace where reporters were greeted by Volpi, Maraini, Bazzoni, Varagnolo and Alfredo Campione, manager at the Ciga. In a speech at the dinner, Campione stressed the many ambitious works being undertaken at the Lido in order to further improve the leisure facilities provided by the Ciga on the island. Subsequently, guests were taken to drink and dance in the enchanted atmosphere of the exclusive 'Chez-Vous' club. Naturally, the evening's expenses were provided by the Ciga, and the whole enterprise was, of course, intended to win the support of the influential press to its side ('La giornata dei giornalisti esteri', *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 23 June 1928).

<sup>74</sup> Ghigi, 'L'olimpiade del Cinema', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 27.

was not the first in history, as has sometimes been claimed. For example, in Rimini, right next to the bathing establishment, a summer cinema festival showing a number of famous films was held in 1905. In Venice itself, in 1910, around 28 cinema halls were already functioning, and at the Lido, the Excelsior Palace Hotel operated its own cinema.<sup>75</sup> Starting in 1923, the Milan Fair promoted a cinematographic competition, in 1929 a film festival was held in Padua, and in 1932, an international film festival was announced in Prague.<sup>76</sup> It should also be remembered that, in May of the same year, a similar festival was planned for Florence. What was new in Venice was the publicity, glamour and extravaganza brought to the event by the film stars and the international press in attendance. In the words of the Prefect Carlo Catalano, the Cinema Festival was a ‘magnificently realized combination of artistic, tourist and economic interests’,<sup>77</sup> representing a viable alternative to the *soirées dansantes* and the masque ball parties taking place at the Lido.<sup>78</sup>

Historian of cinema Gian Piero Brunetta has also commented on Volpi’s intention of re-launching the beach resort, and makes the point that the first thing to benefit from the *Mostra d’Arte Cinematografica* was the tourist season at the Lido.<sup>79</sup> According to Margaret Plant

‘From the first films festival, the event was cleverly packaged for prospective tourists and poster campaigns promoted reductions in air and train travel to the fourteen evenings of screening at the Excelsior. Posters announced the full bill of attractions framed by an image of a giant reel of films unravelling in front of the columns with the lion of St. Mark looking out over a silhouette of Palladio’s Redentore, with a crescent moon in the sky. Historic Venice was thus imaginatively connected with the vibrant new Lido, which in turn had its modern style enhanced by association with the cultural prestige of the old town’.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Gian Piero Brunetta, ‘La città del cinema’, in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, vol. III, p. 2190; Triani, ‘1932, l’age d’or’, in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 55.

<sup>76</sup> Ghigi, ‘L’olimpiade del Cinema’, in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 27.

<sup>77</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 15, busta ‘Mostra Cinematografica di Villa Olmo-Como’.

<sup>78</sup> Volpi, in a letter addressed to the Podestà announced: ‘The cinema exhibition is undoubtedly the initiative that more than anything else deserves to be supported, as it carries out its activity at the Lido, where the municipality concentrates all its reforms for improved tourist development’ (ASAC, Serie Cinema, ‘IV Esposizione d’Arte cinematografica. Costruzione del Palazzo Cinema’).

<sup>79</sup> Brunetta, ‘La città del cinema’, in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 2199.

<sup>80</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 301. It does not look like posters were aimed at a particular section

‘We make cinema for the *popolo*, for the masses’, claimed Pavolini, Minister for the Press and Propaganda, at one point.<sup>81</sup> Yet, despite the fact that cinema was now viewed by Fascist bureaucrats as another way to forge a national community, as far as Venice was concerned, cinema was intended to serve the tourist industry rather than achieve the status of art or serve as Fascist propaganda (we must remember that the committee overseeing the Cinema Festival always included the Director General of Tourism within the Ministry for the Press and Propaganda.<sup>82</sup>).<sup>83</sup>

That the Cinema Festival was created with the purpose of attracting wealthy visitors is self-evident, and the chief interests of the Ciga continued to be vested in elite tourism.<sup>84</sup> The image to be offered to the public was that of an event which mixed glamour with art and creativity; the intention was to link popular culture, aesthetics and tourism to facilitate the economic rebirth of the island.<sup>85</sup> Thus, the first target of the festival was not the development of the cinematographic art form, but the attraction of an exclusive type of tourism to the island, a chic and cultured public, amongst the most glamorous in Europe. The establishment of the Biennale

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of society, though.

<sup>81</sup> Brunetta, *Cinema Italiano tra le due Guerre. Fascismo e Politica Cinematografica*, Milano, Mursia Editore, 1975, p. 81.

<sup>82</sup> Scotto Lavina, ‘1927, 1936’, in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 32*, 82, p. 58. Marla Stone argues that also ‘the spectacle surrounding the designation of prizes at the film festival for production, direction and performance tied the event to shopping and commerce. The numerous categories of prizes, including an audience referendum with monetary awards for the winners underlined the commercial rather than intellectual aspects of artistic production’. (Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 103).

<sup>83</sup> On 13 August 1935, Francesco Marchiori, Secretary of the *Federazione Triveneta fra decorati della ‘Stella al merito del lavoro’* wrote a letter to Count Volpi. The organisation had the ‘patriotic’ task of grouping all the holders of war decorations within a single veterans organisation attached to the Regime, ‘under the symbol of the Lictor’, and to constitute an assistance fund in their favour. Marchiori asked Volpi to set up an extraordinary gala night event within the framework of the film festival to publicize the project. Volpi responded that, for economic reasons, the Biennale administrative committee had decided not to endorse this or any other similar initiatives, whether they were of a public or private nature. In 1941, in a similar fashion, Cornelio Di Marzio, President of the Confederation of Professionals and Artists suggested that the problem of the distribution of free tickets for the Cinema Festival could be solved by the introduction of a system of special screenings for the press in the morning to ensure that everybody else was paying at the entrance in the evening, in order to guarantee certain incomes. (ASAC, Serie Verbalì delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell’Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 12 maggio 1941).

<sup>84</sup> Rizzi, di Martino, *Storia della Biennale*, p. 37.

<sup>85</sup> Brunetta, ‘La città del cinema’, in Isnenghi, Woolf (ed.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 2200.

Cinema Festival constituted a defining point in the creation of a strategic programme of celebrations in which the major cultural events were timed to coincide with the height of the summer tourist season. Prior to the inauguration of the Cinema Festival, the Austrian aristocracy, a mainstay of the elite tourist clientele in Venice, tended to go to the Lido in mid-July, the hottest and least comfortable time of the year back in Austria.<sup>86</sup>

It might be argued, therefore, that the Cinema Festival served as a means of prolonging the peak tourist season in the summer months.<sup>87</sup> For Margaret Plant, 'life turned around the 'season' and the Biennales, the visitors –musicians and actors, both local and international- Stravinsky, Malipiero, Max Reinhardt'.<sup>88</sup> On a broader level, Stone is correct to argue that the Film, Theatre and Music festivals gave the Biennale a multifaceted character, offering a new set of itineraries and new ways of consuming culture. Stone notes that

'After 1932, visitors could make extended trips, partake of a range of activities, select, choose, and consume plays, music, film, and the fine arts. Each of these attractions mobilized consumerist possibilities of culture and of Venice itself by their being situated in different parts of the city, thereby demanding that the spectator move through the city to attend them. The 1934 Biennale brochure underlined the limitless attractions of the event. The brochure was divided into seven promotional sections, including film, fine arts, decorative arts, music, theatre, 'traditional feasts and sports competitions,' and 'exceptional railway reductions'.<sup>89</sup>

For Stone, the Biennale could now be thought of in terms similar to shopping. The art exhibition's pavilions resembled glamorous department stores and 'the act of moving among a variety of attractions located throughout the city deepened Venice's transformation into an extended arcade or theme park'. The

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<sup>86</sup> Scotto Lavina, '1927, 1936', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 32*, 82, p. 58.

<sup>87</sup> In 1942, Volpi was of the opinion that the reception of the event had not been excessively enthusiastic. This had happened, he believed, because screenings had been poorly timetabled in relation to the height of the summer season and that as a result, the exhibition had only been financially rescued by the intervention of the Minister of Popular Culture. (ASAC, Serie Verballi delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell' Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 22 June 1942).

<sup>88</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 302.

<sup>89</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 110.

broadening of the consumer base and the increasing number of those participating in leisure activities lent new emphasis to the quantity of new attractions, shifting the focus away from the artistic quality of the cultural exhibits at the Biennale.<sup>90</sup>

In 1941, despite Italy being at war, Volpi argued that amongst the Biennale events, the Film Festival was 'the most interesting' since it was consistently able to attract foreign participants and visitors. According to Volpi, in Germany cinema halls were earning one thousand million marks per year, while in Italy, the predicted takings of the cinema industry in 1942 were still only one thousand million lire.<sup>91</sup> It is striking that the success of the event was to be measured by the levels of audience attendance rather than artistic merit.<sup>92</sup> Volpi was convinced that, in spite of the war, it was of absolute importance not to terminate a successful event such as the Cinema Festival and risk losing 'the advantages achieved in previous years with the movement of art lovers and especially tourists'.<sup>93</sup> At a meeting of 30 January 1943, the emphasis of the Biennale entourage on the tourist importance of the festival was unchanged. It was clearly established as the most internationally renowned and glamorous of the arts events in Venice. Moreover, because it was staged in a short period which coincided with the tourist season, the festival served the 'highly valuable function of drawing additional tourists to Venice and bringing great economic benefits to the city'.<sup>94</sup> At the same meeting, Maraini explained to the members, the convenience, for economic reasons, of bringing forward the opening of the festival, in order to make it coincide with the very start of the summer season.<sup>95</sup>

The connection between the municipality, the Biennale and the Ciga was embodied in the person of Giuseppe Volpi. In the 1930s, he accelerated the process of transformation of the city: the bridge over the lagoon was inaugurated, and the initiatives to turn the Lido into a centre of holiday entertainment were implemented with panache. The relaunching of the Lido as a glamorous resort can once again be

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbalì delle Adunanze del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 17 June 1941.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, session 22 June 1942.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, session 30 January 1943.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

seen as indicative of the municipality's desire to subdivide the Venetian area into zones of distinct economic development, a process inherent in the plan to realize the conception of *Greater Venice*.<sup>96</sup>

### 5.3 The Fascist intervention

In 1932, 'the Biennale inaugurated the International Film Festival, screening forty films from nine nations and attracting 25,000 spectators. It showed two films per night for twenty nights, with the projections taking place on the seaside terrace of the Excelsior Hotel'.<sup>97</sup> The order of the films shown was scheduled according to nationality, providing a similar organisational concept to that employed in many of the fine arts pavilions. The official charter claimed that 'the enterprise ha[d], as one of its goals, the aim of recognising and rewarding those cinematographic works which tend[ed] towards authentic art expressions, without prejudice of nationality or genre'.<sup>98</sup> From the start, the festival was characterised by variety and entertainment, presenting films in a range of languages and styles.<sup>99</sup>

According to Stone 'the Venice Film Festival soon acquired a popular following, with attendance figures consistently high throughout the 1930s. In 1935, 38,500 people attended; in 1936 there were 50,000 spectators and the 1937 festival

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<sup>96</sup> Ghigi, 'L'olimpiade del Cinema', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 27.

<sup>97</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 101.

<sup>98</sup> As cited in Ghigi, 'L'olimpiade del Cinema', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 29.

<sup>99</sup> At the Festival's 1932 debut, Italy presented 'Gli Uomini che Mascalzoni...' by Mario Camerini. French showings included 'A nous la liberté' by René Clair, 'Au nom de la loi' by Maurice Tourneur, 'David Golder' by Julien Duvivier, 'Hotel des Etudiants' by Viktor Tourjansky, 'Azais' by René Hervil. German movies comprised Leni Riefenstahl's 'Das Blaue Licht', Leontine Sagan's 'Mädchen in Uniform', Erik Charell's 'Der Kongress tanzt' and Anatole Litvak's 'Das Lied Einer Nacht'. Great Britain presented 'The Faithful Heart' by Viktor Faville while Poland participated with 'Bialy Slad' by Adam Krzeptowski. The Soviet Union's movies included 'Putevka v Zizn' by Nikolaj Ekk and 'Tichij Don' by Olga Preobrazenskaja and Ivan Pravov. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, it was American productions that dominated the inaugural event. 'Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' by Rouben Mamoulian, 'The Champ' by King Vidor, 'Frankenstein' by James Whale, 'The Crowd Roars' by Howard Hawks, 'Bring 'em back alive' by Clayde E. Elliott, 'The Sin of Madelon Claudet' by Edgar Selwyn, 'Forbidden' by Frank Capra, 'Grand Hotel' by Edmund Goulding, 'The Devil to Pay' by George Fitzmaurice, 'Strange Interlude' by Robert Z. Leonard and 'The Man I Killed/Broken Lullaby' by Ernst Lubitsch, were all major draws at the Festival (Gianni Rondolino, 'Alla prima esposizione in mostra lo 'stato' del cinema', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, pp. 79-80) According to art critic Lorenzo Pellizzari, during the Fascist era, the Cinema Biennale was characterised by a general aversion to risk and experimentation and the dominant genres tended to be drawn from the commercial mainstream, maximising the festival's popular appeal and commercial potential (Lorenzo Pellizzari, 'Dalla terrazza un solo grido: all'arte!

was visited by 36,000 viewers'.<sup>100</sup> Yet, the pricing of a festival ticket, 5 lire, twice the price of a normal cinema ticket meant that the festival was aimed at an elite audience rather than the working class.<sup>101</sup>

Yet, for Doug Thompson, 'the cinema, unlike the theatre or radio, was used to relatively little political effect by the regime, considering its vast potential. Here was a ready-made form of mass entertainment which, for the most part, served the regime in the negative sense of directing people's minds away from the often harsh realities of their own lives into an escapist world of make-believe or entertainment for its own sake'.<sup>102</sup> By the same token, the national government initially paid little or no attention to the Film Festival which was considered a totally Venetian concern born of commercial imperatives and organized under local auspices. For Stone, 'the total politicisation of the film festival came slowly'.<sup>103</sup> Mussolini himself failed to appreciate the possibilities of cinema, expressing the opinion that 'the theatre was much more efficacious as an instrument of popular education'.<sup>104</sup> It was also the case that at the first festival in 1932, just one Italian film, the Cines Company's 'Gli Uomini che Mascalzoni...', was presented.<sup>105</sup>

Luciano De Feo, head of the *Istituto Internazionale di Cinematografia Educativa*, recalling the first editions of the Biennale Cinema underlined the 'freedom of choice' that was possible at the time.<sup>106</sup> After all, the festival's official charter stated that the position of the Film Festival within the exhibition depended upon the 'exclusion of influences of an overtly political character'.<sup>107</sup> This could naturally place restrictions on artistic freedoms but it could also have the effect of excluding any films with overtly Fascist themes. The festival's atmosphere was instead characterised by the carefree spirit of *menefreghismo*, with *Gerarchi* and

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all'arte!', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, pp. 59-60).

<sup>100</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 108.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p. 105.

<sup>102</sup> Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy*, p. 121.

<sup>103</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 108. From 1934, the best Italian movies were prized with a *Coppa Mussolini* (*La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 32*, 82, p. 70).

<sup>104</sup> Thompson, 'Organisation, fascistization and management of theatre', in Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre*, p. 97.

<sup>105</sup> Pellizzari, 'Dalla terrazza un solo grido', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 63.

<sup>106</sup> As cited in Ghigi, 'l'olimpiade del Cinema', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 34; De Feo, 'Ricordando le due prime edizioni', *L'Eco del Cinema e dello Spettacolo*, n. 78-79, 15 and 31 August 1954.

ceremonial uniforms conspicuous by their absence.<sup>108</sup> The hasty organisation of the exhibition betrayed a somewhat marginal and semi-official initial status. Two weeks before the opening of the festival, the programme for the event was still unknown, and Maraini had to pressure De Feo to announce it as soon as possible. De Feo was actually forced to postpone the inauguration from the 1st to the 6th August, but on the 2nd August the calendar of events was still incomplete, and on the 4th Bazzoni informed Volpi that the programme was once again in need of modification.<sup>109</sup> Even an insider like Elio Zorzi admitted that the preparation of the Cinema Festival was effectively an act of improvisation on the part of the Biennale entourage and the *Istituto per la Cinematografia Educativa*.<sup>110</sup>

In 1932, despite formal requests from the Biennale administration and much to the disappointment of the organisers, Mussolini had refused membership of the festival's honorary committee.<sup>111</sup> Maraini himself had tried hard to convince him through various telegrams and notes, a fact which provides another example of the way in which the Biennale entourage sought formal recognition from the central government for the cultural events staged in Venice.<sup>112</sup> Such acknowledgment not only granted legitimacy to the festivals concerned but also contributed to their financial security.

Significantly, however, the state did not provide funds for the Cinema Festival which was financed instead by the Biennale with the assistance of a loan from the Ciga worth 25,000 lire.<sup>113</sup> The relatively little attention paid towards the exhibition by the Fascist authorities was also reflected in the composition of its executive committee which included only one political member, the Secretary

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<sup>107</sup> As cited in Brunetta, 'La città del cinema', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 2200.

<sup>108</sup> Ghigi, 'l'olimpiade del Cinema', in La Biennale di Venezia (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, pp. 34-5.

<sup>109</sup> The problems went beyond the film programme itself. At the end of July, the Theatre *La Fenice* refused to lend chairs for the festival because of a forthcoming concert featuring the tenor, Schipa. Bazzoni had to appeal to various other cinemas in Venice and to the Provincial Dopolavoro to find extra ones (ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 4, busta 'Mostra Cinematografica').

<sup>110</sup> Zorzi, 'La Terza Mostra Mondiale della Cinematografia a Venezia'.

<sup>111</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 4, busta 'Mostra Cinematografica'.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Financial intervention from the state came afterwards.



General of the National Fascist Federation of Spectacle, Nicola De Pirro.<sup>114</sup> Consequently, it tended to be the Biennale administrative board that pressed for more contacts with the government. In 1932, with the creation of a vacancy on the executive committee, Volpi, representing the interests of the Film Festival, persuaded Mussolini to appoint a member of the Council of Ministers, and suggested the Prefect of Venice Guido Beer. In the same manner, the Biennale invited cultural and political institutions to offer prizes and awards at the end of the exhibition.<sup>115</sup>

In the first days of July 1932, Volpi informed Giovanni Bettori of the *Associazione Nazionale Fascista delle Industrie e dello Spettacolo* (National Fascist Association of the Industries of Spectacle), that the Biennale wished to provide funding to those production companies which had presented the best films. The same invitations were directed to the president of S.I.A.E. (Italian Society of Authors and Editors), to the National Fascist Federation of Spectacle and the Podestà of Venice. Yet, the first Cinema Festival was concluded without any prizes being awarded.<sup>116</sup> The objectives of the organisers can be understood if one considers a letter sent by the Biennale to the Minister of Corporations in 1932 which argued that the Minister should 'not stand aloof from the great competition but demonstrate his consent to the award of a trophy'.<sup>117</sup> Through the institution of prizes offered by Fascist bodies, the Biennale hoped to involve a larger sector of the regime in the development of the new festival. The aim of the letter was also to give a permanent character to the Cinema Festival, which explains why Maraini had been keen to stress the importance of the event imposing itself successfully.<sup>118</sup>

Stone argues that the regime in the very beginning did not really take into consideration the Biennale Cinema Festival:

'In 1934, in an effort to coordinate and stimulate national production (as well as to extract as much publicity as possible), the Film Festival became annual. In recognition of the

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<sup>114</sup> Francesco Bono, 'Cronaca di una mostra senza orbace, censure e coppe di regime', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 104.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

growing importance of film to Fascism's propaganda efforts, an Undersecretariat for Cinematography was opened in the Ministry of Popular Culture. Thus, the inauguration of the film festival anticipated by just over a year the regime's first active intervention in film production and its establishment of the permanent undersecretariat to regulate both the private and state production and distribution of feature films. The Biennale mounted the festival with the aid of the L'Unione cinematografica educativa (Istituto Luce), the film studio established by the Fascist government in 1924 and, after 1934, administered by the Undersecretariat for Cinematography. The Biennale staff coordinated the technical aspects of the show, while, after 1936, the Ministry of Popular Culture organized and promoted the festival'.<sup>119</sup>

In 1935, Elio Zorzi was in the position to declare that a state law formally recognizing the festival would be greatly appreciated.<sup>120</sup> It seems that, 'for the majority of the 1930s, Venice was a *portofranco* for the international cinematographic culture'.<sup>121</sup> Yet, according to Thompson, 'there are very real signs that by the end of the 1930s just such a shift in awareness by the government was beginning to take place. From 1935 on the cinematographic industry was gradually passing more and more under Fascist control so far as its organisation was concerned'.<sup>122</sup>

Stone continues:

'As the 1930s progressed, the content of the film festival mirrored larger alterations in the regime's attitude toward culture. After 1935, Fascism's foregrounding of the rhetoric of empire as a way of conveying messages about the nation and race was reflected in the prizes awarded: in this period the Biennale introduced a prize for 'Best Colonial Film' and films of bombastic propaganda began to receive the bulk of the prizes. (...) As part of its growing control over the creation and dissemination of films, the Ministry of Popular Culture under Dino Alfieri expanded the ministry's role in the festival. A law of February 13, 1936, severed the film festival from the Biennale and decreed it an *ente autonomo* – an equivalent and autonomous legal status to the Biennale. As would happen to the Biennale itself within a year, the film festival was now run by committees of appointed party and government officials. The head of the Department of Cinema of the Ministry of Popular

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<sup>119</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, p. 107-8.

<sup>120</sup> Zorzi, 'Bilancio consuntivo della Terza Mostra d'Arte Cinematografica'.

<sup>121</sup> Brunetta, 'La città del cinema', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 2200.

<sup>122</sup> Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy*, p. 123.

Culture, the president of the LUCE, and the president of the Fascist National Federation of Entertainment Industries held government appointed posts at the film festival'.<sup>123</sup>

In Venice, things changed radically in the second half of the 1930s, with the development of a dramatically different atmosphere after 1937, when the Fascist regime finally revealed its own interest in the festival. The increasingly unstable and aggressive international climate of the late 1930s and Italy's alliance with Nazi Germany forced the regime to strengthen its hold over the instruments and media of mass persuasion. Cinema, and therefore the Venice Film Festival, had come to be viewed as an effective way to convey political messages to the nation –not so much through feature films as through the newsreels that were shown alongside them and over which the regime could exert full editorial control.<sup>124</sup>

On 10 August 1937, at the inauguration of the exhibition, Dino Alfieri declared:

'It is important to underline the value that the exhibition had acquired with merit through its annual progressive development. To have included within the cultural domain of the Venetian summer season such an important international attraction constitutes a major achievement on the part of Senator Volpi to which the Minister pays tribute (...). This is why the Fascist government –through the organs created for the occasion –has undertaken and undertakes a constant action in order to obtain that the renowned Italian cinematography be expression of the new civilization which bears the name of Benito Mussolini'.<sup>125</sup>

By 1938, 'political exigencies came to overshadow aesthetic or audience-attracting concerns', and the relative degree of freedom enjoyed by the juries suddenly disappeared. After 1937, Nazi Germany was repeatedly awarded the prize for 'Best Foreign Film', and in 1940, the festival transformed itself into the *Manifestazione cinematografica italo-germanica* (Italian-German Film Festival).<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, pp. 109-10.

<sup>124</sup> Nowell-Smith, 'The Italian cinema under Fascism', in Forgacs (ed.), *Rethinking Italian Fascism*, p. 149.

<sup>125</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 4, busta 'Mostra Cinematografica'.

<sup>126</sup> Stone, *The Patron State*, pp. 109-10.

Nonetheless, on a broader level, according to Philip Cannistraro, the regime never adopted a clear cultural policy towards cinema during the *Ventennio*.<sup>127</sup> Fascism was slow to appreciate the power of cinema as a medium of political propaganda despite its wide-ranging popularity as a form of entertainment amongst ordinary Italians.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, Nowell-Smith insists upon the absence of distinct cultural directives in the Fascist period:<sup>129</sup> ‘even with the centralization of industrial control there was still no artistic policy for the cinema formulated by the regime emanating from on high and transmitted via functionaries and cadres’.<sup>130</sup> At least in the very beginning, Fascism did not feel the need to impose any ‘propagandistic requirement over cinema’.<sup>131</sup> When it did intervene in the field of cinematographic art it did so either through administrative censorship, or the Institute LUCE.<sup>132</sup>

Falasca-Zamponi claims that ‘Mussolini did not adopt particular measures with regard to cinema until late in the 1930s, although his regime acquired laws and regulations on it established by the liberal government, which first had to face the reality and implications of this new cultural medium’.<sup>133</sup> For Brunetta, Fascism inherited all the censorship laws from the Giolittian era, and reinforced them through a Royal Decree of 24 September 1924. There followed, in the 1930s, an increase in the extent of government intrusion into all the mass media but especially cinema, which was placed under several new forms of control.<sup>134</sup>

A law of 18 June 1931 formalised state intervention to promote the national cinematographic industry. This was followed by the decree of 1933, which imposed upon all Italian cinemas the responsibility of screening at least one Italian film for every three foreign ones. ‘The State’, wrote Luigi Freddi, ‘has the right and the

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<sup>127</sup> Cannistraro, ‘Il cinema italiano sotto il fascismo’, *Storia Contemporanea*, 1972, 3.

<sup>128</sup> Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, p. 143.

<sup>129</sup> Nowell-Smith, ‘The Italian cinema under Fascism’, in Forgacs (ed.), *Rethinking Italian Fascism*, p. 159.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>131</sup> Brunetta, ‘La città del cinema’, in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 2201.

<sup>132</sup> Ibidem, *Cinema Italiano tra le due Guerre*, p. 29. The creation of the Istituto Luce constituted the only early involvement of the regime providing a mass popular vision of Fascism and its achievements in Italy and overseas through its newsreels and documentaries (Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy*, p. 122).

<sup>133</sup> Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, p. 142.

<sup>134</sup> Brunetta, *Cinema Italiano tra le due Guerre*, p. 29-32. It is significant that in 1930 the national production counted five movies, while, in 1942, it counted around one hundred and fifty. From 1936 to 1940 there was an increase of 50% in cinema attendance rates. It had taken around twelve years to

duty to intervene in those areas concerning [cinema's] ethical function and [commercial] well-being'.<sup>135</sup> However, it was in 1934 that the most remarkable aspects of Fascist cultural politics were implemented. In this respect, the shift to the Ministry for the Press and Propaganda of the management of all cinematographic activities through the creation of a regulatory body called *Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia*, headed by Freddi, was of great significance. Additionally, the *Centro Sperimentale per la Cinematografia* was founded as an institute of both theoretical and practical research, providing full cinematographic, aesthetic and technical education to young directors, screenwriters, managers and technicians.<sup>136</sup> For the representatives of the first *Congresso Nazionale Cinematografico*, cinema now constituted 'a vigorous means of national propaganda'.<sup>137</sup>

It is not the intention here to dwell upon the content of the films shown at the Biennale Film Festival as a means of measuring the extent of state influence. However, limited awareness of the history of Italian cinema has done little to dispel a number of misleading perceptions and assumptions. For Nowell-Smith,

'Italian film has been depicted as a cinema of propaganda and ideologically motivated escapism –the propaganda being mainly in newsreels and documentaries, the escapism mainly in entertainment features. Recent research has cast serious doubt on the validity of this propaganda/escapism model even in the case of Nazi Germany, and all the more strongly for Italy. (...) To the extent that the model is accurate, it is applicable also to cinema in the liberal democracies of the period. The focus of Italian films in the 1930s was predominantly domestic, set against a background of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois concerns. There was no sense of a mobilized society and the lives represented on screen were refreshingly normal'.<sup>138</sup>

It seems safe to argue that no distinctively Fascist ideology in a political sense emerged in the majority of Italian films in the period which implied, at most, passive support of the regime rather than the performance of an active role on its

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establish those structures for the regulation of Italian cinema control (Ibid, p. 41-2).

<sup>135</sup> As cited in Cannistraro, 'Il cinema italiano sotto il fascismo', p. 430.

<sup>136</sup> Brunetta, *Cinema Italiano tra le Due Guerre*, p. 43.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>138</sup> Nowell-Smith, 'The Italian cinema under Fascism', in Forgacs (ed.), *Rethinking Italian Fascism*, pp. 142-3, 150.

behalf. For Thompson, 'Italian films remained largely what the cinema-going public seemed to prefer, namely the light, socially inconsequential forerunners of 'sitcoms'. So long as film makers avoided social criticism or alternative models of society to the Fascist absolute, they had more or less a free hand'.<sup>139</sup>

To conclude, the regime geared its attention towards the Cinema Festival in the second half of the 1930s, when Mussolini had expressed his wish 'to go towards the people', the international political situation was deteriorating, and there was therefore a need to forge a stronger totalitarian state through mass culture. Because cinema embodied one of the most effective means of propaganda, and the Venice Film Festival had acquired great popularity through which it could bestow credibility to Fascism on an international level, the regime wished to increase its control over it.

#### **5.4 The construction of the Cinema Palace**

Since the inauguration of the first Cinema Festival in 1932, the lack of a suitable venue for the event had proved a real problem for the Biennale administration. In 1936, by which time the festival had successfully established itself, the town council recognized that there was a need to build an indoor cinema pavilion in order to minimise the danger that the Biennale lose control of the event which had been hitherto held at the outdoor theatre of the Excelsior Palace.<sup>140</sup>

Volpi and Maraini took up different positions on the issue. Maraini, together with Luciano De Feo, was of the opinion that a brand new cinema pavilion should be constructed in S. Elena, within the Biennale Gardens, lending a geographic continuity to the Biennale events. The planned theatre pavilion would be capable of hosting 2,000 people, extending its potential audience beyond the social elites and enabling the participation of a wider audience drawn from all social classes (the Excelsior Palace could hold only 1,000 people per night of which 50% were meant to be Venetians).<sup>141</sup> Maraini also wished to free the event from the control of strictly local interests such as the hotel industry.

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<sup>139</sup> Thompson, *State Control in Fascist Italy*, p. 123.

<sup>140</sup> AMV, Verballi delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 30 June 1936.

<sup>141</sup> Ghigi, 'l'olimpiade del Cinema', in *La Biennale di Venezia* (ed.), *Venezia 1932*, p. 30.

In contrast, Volpi, with his large economic stakes within the Ciga, was keen to keep the Film Festival at the outdoor theatre of the Hotel Excelsior. He argued that the audience would not like the idea of leaving the Lido beach in full summer to attend the festival in Venice. Moreover, he was not convinced that the Biennale Gardens in S. Elena were adequately provided for in terms of the necessary transport facilities, and they represented a far less appealing venue than the Excelsior which was a tourist attraction in its own right, and was capable of drawing numerous visitors to the Lido. Keeping the Film Festival at the Lido meant that it would remain part of the summer celebrations, part of the tourist industry, and of economic importance to the major hotels on the island.

Here, another clash between the representatives of the national interests (Maraini and De Feo) and the representatives of the local hotel industry (Volpi) is evident. While Maraini and De Feo wished to reach the highest number of cultural consumers through the Cinema Festival, and tie the event to the Biennale as a Fascist institution, Volpi aimed at satisfying an elite clientele, in tune with the most recent urban planning, where different sections of the Lido were dedicated to different kinds of economic activity within a broadly-based tourist industry.

Eventually, the municipality decided that a brand new pavilion should be built at the Lido, as part of the growing complex of leisure facilities beside the Municipal Casino. This was far closer to Volpi's position, and by choosing the beach resort rather than the Biennale Gardens, the character of the Cinema Festival was more clearly defined as serving tourist rather than cultural interests. The initial hope for a building capable of housing 2,000 people was modified mainly for economic reasons. Estimated costs for the original project stood at 5 million lire, and another, less expensive plan was adopted. The new scheme envisaged the construction of a single projection hall, worth around 2.3 million lire, with a capacity of about 1,000 people, approximately the same as the existing outdoor facilities at the Excelsior Palace.<sup>142</sup>

On 7 June 1937, Volpi wrote to Achille Gaggia, one of the leading figures in the Ciga, about the proposed location of the cinema palace. Now that the

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<sup>142</sup> ASAC, Serie Cinema, 'Lavori 1937. Costruzione del Palazzo Cinema'.

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company and the Biennale would come closer, both Volpi and Gaggia agreed that the relationship between them needed to be carefully regulated. In particular, according to Volpi, the Biennale should cede land recently acquired from the state to the Ciga without charge. In return, the Ciga would build the cinema palace at its own expense, since the construction costs were beyond the financial capabilities of the Biennale administration.<sup>143</sup> The cinema palace would then be committed to the Biennale's activities during the film festival in August, while over the rest of the year, the Ciga could use the new facility for its own profit. 'After all', argued Volpi, 'this initiative of the cinema that the Ciga is supporting is to benefit tourist interests in Venice, first of all'. Volpi also discussed the possibility of requesting a loan from the *Banca del Lavoro* which provided a branch specifically dedicated for cinema businesses and film production.<sup>144</sup>

Initially, the prospective sum of 5 million lire required by the Biennale administration for the construction of the cinema pavilion was to be subsidised as follows: 1) one million given by the Ciga as compensation for an equivalent amount paid to the company by the town council for the annual rent of the premises temporarily housing the *casa da gioco* at the Hotel Excelsior; 2) another million given as a gratuity by the Ciga; 3) three million lire given by the financial institutes (*Istituti di Credito*) with provisional funding. Furthermore, the Minister of Popular Culture had also decided to contribute to the costs of the cinema palace with 200,000 lire taken from the amount of 2 million lire that the Ministry expected to receive annually from the incomes of the casino, for a period of 14 years starting from 1 January 1938.

Under the terms of these proposals, the *Venice Comune* would become the sole owner of the cinema pavilion.<sup>145</sup> This scheme changed dramatically when the Ciga offered to subsidize the cinema palace in its entirety. Volpi, after getting in touch with the Minister of Finance and the Director General of Tourism, discovered that the company could obtain excellent terms from the *Credito Alberghiero* if it

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 'Lavori 1937', dal n. 1 al n. 15, n. 1.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. As the pavilion was to become a property of the Venetian municipality, the latter was forced to pay annually a contribution of 100,000 lire to the Biennale administration taken from the profits of the *Stazione di Cura, Soggiorno e Turismo* (AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Mutuo per il



agreed to finance the whole enterprise. Volpi wrote to Achille Gaggia that, in his opinion, the Ciga could not hope for better conditions, as, in this way, the building would belong to the company as part of the Excelsior Palace, together with the terrace, the casino, the tennis courts and the swimming pool.<sup>146</sup>

These developments underlined the importance of the commercial stakes of the Ciga in the Cinema Festival. For public consumption, however, the company's main emphasis was placed upon the moral value of the enterprise and the artistic interests of the citizens. According to the official convention, the Biennale administration was to communicate to the Ciga, three months in advance, the date of the inauguration of the cinema exhibition. By the same token, the Biennale was to pay the Ciga 15% of the gross income originating from the sale of the entrance tickets, and all the advertisements to be hung on the walls of the cinema palace were to be an exclusive right of the Ciga.<sup>147</sup> It is also significant that all the electrical installation works at the cinema palace were to be undertaken by Volpi's SADE company, for which the latter was to charge 14,316 lire.<sup>148</sup> The newly built cinema palace was directly linked to the Ciga's Excelsior Hotel, and engineers and other experts were provided by the company which managed all the contracts, the choice of the furniture and fabrics, and the settlement of bills.<sup>149</sup>

The role of the Biennale administrative board demonstrates the existence of a strong link with the Ciga, and the company specifically requested that the Biennale keep all correspondence with the various suppliers and the authorities. According to the Biennale executives, the Ciga, having undertaken the task of building the new cinema palace, reserved the right to deliberate and decide upon expenses. On the other hand, the former insisted that the board had always acted with the maximum respect for and deference to the decisions of the Ciga.<sup>150</sup> In the same period, Volpi, in writing to Bazzoni, noted how the company, contributing for the main part to the creation of the cinema palace was 'almost giving a present to

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finanziamento del Palazzo del Cinema a Lido', trim. III, 1938, n. 2204).

<sup>146</sup> ASAC, Serie Cinema, 'Lavori 1937', dal n. 1 al n. 15, n. 2.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 'IV Esposizione d'Arte cinematografica. Costruzione del Palazzo Cinema'.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

the Biennale',<sup>151</sup> when, in fact, this 'present' was justified by the undoubted economic benefits that would accrue to the Ciga. That the company was so heavily involved in the project meant that the Film Festival would soon acquire an even stronger commercial identity than before, at the expense of its reputation as a predominantly cultural event. The Ciga would also retain a high degree of control over the production of the festival, while the continuing association with the Biennale would act as a kind of cultural veneer. Ultimately, the Ciga's involvement and interests in the erection of the cinema palace can only be properly understood as a commercial venture dictated by economic interests.

The Podestà sanctioned the construction of the pavilion, underlining the need for supervision by the Minister of Popular Culture, of the 'great international tourist and artistic resonance of the event organized by the Biennale and the immense benefit to the city of Venice'.<sup>152</sup> That the cinema palace was there to serve tourist purposes is quite clear.<sup>153</sup> Not only did the pavilion host the Film Festival after mid-August, but it would also be used during the entire summer to hold cultural events and amusements of various kinds. On these grounds, the Podestà ordered the palace be opened from 15<sup>th</sup> June to 15<sup>th</sup> August in order to host twice-daily theatrical performances specially staged for the citizens of the Lido, 'with the goal of livening up the life at the Lido and the summer season'. The management of the events was entrusted to the Theatre *Malibran*, and was to be controlled from the artistic point of view by the Secretariat of the festival. Should the new venture prove to be unsuccessful, the Podestà established that half of the loss be covered by the municipality and the other half by the casino.<sup>154</sup>

By the same token, it is significant that the Biennale administration in 1937

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 'Lavori 1937. Costruzione del Palazzo Cinema'.

<sup>152</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Mutuo per il finanziamento del Palazzo del Cinema al Lido', trim. III, 1938, n. 2204. Additionally, the Podestà noticed how the realization of the pavilion would enhance the value of the municipal estates (Ibid).

<sup>153</sup> On 4 June 1937, Volpi wrote to the Podestà Alverà: 'Undoubtedly, this complex of buildings [the Cinema Palace] of the new urban plan devised for the Lido retains an industrial character because it serves the purpose of developing the cinematographic industry, and a cultural one at the same time because it tends to improve the tastes of the audience for what is great in the international artistic production. I must add that the Film Festival does not have a speculative character but only aims at the tourist development of the city of Venice' (ASAC, Serie Cinema, 'IV Esposizione d'Arte cinematografica. Costruzione del Palazzo Cinema').

<sup>154</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Rappresentazioni cinematografiche diurne e serali al Palazzo

was concerned, mainly for commercial reasons, with the delays afflicting the construction of the cinema palace. It was vital that the pavilion was completed for the beginning of the festival in August, as the 1937 summer season was particularly rainy and thus poor from the financial perspective of the tourist industry.<sup>155</sup> To miss the beginning of the cinema exhibition in mid-August would have meant holding just a quarter of the screenings, with negative implications for the entire holidaying season at the Lido.<sup>156</sup> Ciga takings of the late 1930s increased as a result of the construction of the Cinema Palace.<sup>157</sup>

Once again, economic matters had won over the imperative of 'going towards the people', and thus over ideological concerns. This is further proof of the ambiguous nature of cultural events organized in Venice. They may well have incorporated Fascist ideology, yet the first target to be met was always the direct benefit of the local economy, with any contribution to Fascist ideological projects being very much a secondary consideration.

### **5.5 Moral ambiguity and the institution of the Municipal Casino**

The establishment of a casino at the Lido and the codes of morality issued to regulate life at the beach resort in the 1930s (see following section) reveal the existence of a clash between Fascist ethics and the city's need to further its identity as a site of leisure, bourgeois entertainment and summer carelessness of cosmopolitan flavour. The casino was blessed by the central government from the very beginning, indicating that the economic/tourist function of the institution and the prospect of additional revenues were far more important than any Fascist ideology of 'productivism' and 'honest work'. As for behavioural codes on the seaside, records show that autarchy and nationalism should come to terms with local exigencies of healthy international relations and cosmopolitanism.

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del Cinema al Lido', trim. III, 1941, n. 1905.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> ASAC, Serie Cinema, 'Lavori 1937', dal n. 1 al n. 15, n. 2.

<sup>157</sup> In 1936, Ciga profits increased to 2,895,568 lire (Camera di Commercio, Industria e Artigianato di Venezia, Registro Ditte, I Fascicolo, n. 4905, 'Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi. Bilancio 1936'). Despite the unfavourable international circumstances, in 1937, helped by the Tintoretto Exhibition, takings rose even more substantially to 4,245,446 lire (Ibid, 'Bilancio 1937'). In 1938, they reached 5,773,465 lire (Ibid, 'Bilancio 1938').

It has already been demonstrated that, in the 1930s, the town authorities hoped that the opening of a municipal casino at the Lido would contribute to the revitalization of the Venetian economy.<sup>158</sup> In particular, the *Comune di Venezia* planned to inject new life into the tourist industries of Venice and the Lido as part of the Volpian politics of the *Greater Venice*.<sup>159</sup> According to Bosworth, in 1931, Fulvio Suvich, president of the ENIT, had claimed that ‘Italian hotels needed easier access to credit and the state should also be more eager to sponsor those *spettacoli* which could attract foreigners, though it should avoid replicating such morally doubtful French diversions as gambling’.<sup>160</sup> Despite Suvich’s warnings, in the 1930s, gambling was indeed at the heart of the new Venetian tourist economy.<sup>161</sup> In 1936, *La Gazzetta di Venezia* reported how tourism in Venice was on the brink of a new crisis because of the decline in the number of holidaymakers in the lagoon.<sup>162</sup> For this reason, the Podestà addressed the Minister for the Interior, ‘stressing the vulnerable economic situation in Venice’, and portraying the question of the casino as a straightforward revenue issue.<sup>163</sup> As he saw it, the heavy reliance of Venice upon tourism meant that a *casa da gioco* represented the best available new path to economic security.

However, a heated debate had emerged within the town council around the possible establishment of the *casa da gioco* as early as 1924. In those years, Davide

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<sup>158</sup> Sergio Barizza, *Il Casino Municipale di Venezia. Una Storia degli Anni Trenta*, Venezia, Arsenale, 1988, p. 12 (Barizza is currently in charge of the Archivio Municipale di Venezia). In 1930, a Luna Park was constructed at the Lido with the aim of creating an entertaining place for all the tourists visiting the island. Again, the idea of building a Luna Park came from Nicolò Spada, founder of the Ciga (Rizzi (ed.), ‘La costruzione del Luna Park’, *Lido di oggi*, anno III, n. 3, August 1988, p. 110). It included a hall for concerts, a coffee bar, a theatre, gardens and an outdoor cinema hall to which the Ciga had contributed (AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 21 September 1931).

<sup>159</sup> Barizza, *Il Casino Municipale di Venezia*, p. 12.

<sup>160</sup> As cited in Bosworth, ‘Tourist planning in Fascist Italy’, p. 15.

<sup>161</sup> According to Margaret Plant ‘the new Casino was advertised as ‘open all year round’ in an endeavour to attract its clients beyond summer; but summer was *the* season for the Lido; and it was in its heyday in the 1930s. New sporting facilities had been developed in 1929: there was a golf course at Alberoni designed by a Scottish expert, Cruikshank, and tennis courts at the Excelsior. Day and night life were perpetual spectacles, with not only guests, royalty, aristocracy and, increasingly, the new stars of film, but also Les Girls, who performed their acrobatics on the sand, and the night club Chez Vous’ (Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 303). Eventually, the town administration came to rely heavily upon the profits of the casino to balance its municipal budget (Barizza, *Il Casino Municipale di Venezia*, p. 10).

<sup>162</sup> Gino Bertini, ‘Autunno dorato a Venezia’, *La Gazzetta di Venezia*, 19 October 1936.

<sup>163</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 302.

Giordano persisted in his refusal to consider the launch of a casino either in Venice or at the Lido, regardless of the deepening post-war recession.<sup>164</sup> Along with Giordano, several members of the town council believed that a casino might constitute a force for the moral corruption of the population, and they thought that the Lido could attract foreigners without the aid of amusements of that kind. Later ~~the~~, the vice-Podestà Brass, claimed that many felt a sense of unease in thinking that the destiny of the Venetian population's well-being depended upon incomes 'of such nature'.<sup>165</sup> Even if it was recognised that the casino was a necessary financial asset, a part of the town authorities would have preferred to find alternative sources of income. Vittorio Fantucci, for instance, was among those arguing that Venice should live upon the proceeds of 'honest work' rather than the profits of gambling.<sup>166</sup> On the other hand, Brass believed that the casino constituted a necessary financial measure to improve welfare, education, art and culture.<sup>167</sup>

Not surprisingly, Giordano and later Brass, Fantucci and other town council members were also against the widespread process of tourist development that took place at the Lido in the 1930s, and which could put the natural lagoon environment in danger. A totally different case was set out by councillors Alfredo Campione and Beppe Ravà of the Ciga, who firmly backed the construction of additional tourist attractions and infrastructure at the Lido.<sup>168</sup>

Nonetheless, in 1936, Fantucci remarked that the government could not devolve any more contributions to Venice, and had no other choice but to institute the *casa da gioco* in order to help the city. The contentious nature of the issue was one of the reasons why it was eventually decided that the casino should be located in the Lido and not in Venice itself, and why Venetians were banned from gambling (a ban that was never strictly enforced though).<sup>169</sup> It is significant that a Fascist regime was prepared to allow Venice to rely upon the proceeds of gambling and not 'honest work'. However, the government permitted the creation of the

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<sup>164</sup> AMV, Davide Giordano, *Relazione sulla amministrazione straordinaria del Comune di Venezia 4 aprile 1923-July 1924*, Venezia, 1924.

<sup>165</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 14 November 1928.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, session 6 July 1938.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, session 30 June 1936.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

casino in order to solve the apparent crisis of tourism in the city.<sup>170</sup> It was far more important that Venice should start relying upon her own revenue generating potential, and a licensed and regulated casino could well provide the additional finances and tourist appeal so sought after by the town authorities.

Significantly, the charter for the management of the *casa da gioco* also established that the Ministry for the Press and Propaganda should benefit from the annual revenues earned by gambling, and in its first year of existence, the casino paid 469,526 lire to the Ministry.<sup>171</sup> Casino administrators were also required to contribute to the tourist authorities, and were thus instructed to pay 300,000 lire per annum to the *Ente Provinciale per il Turismo*.<sup>172</sup> According to the town council, incomes retained by the Ministry at the end of the 1930s were ‘piuttosto larghi’ (quite conspicuous),<sup>173</sup> and on 23 May 1936, the Podestà Alverà expressed his concern to Minister Buffarini about this matter. Alverà was convinced that the participation of the state should be cut back and its share of the profits reduced to a more modest level. The Ministry instead was to become a ‘controller’ of the funds destined for tourism, sports and culture which involved both the Venice *Comune* and the management of the casino.<sup>174</sup> In view of these new incomes, Fascism might well overlook the ‘low morality’ of the casino and the Church’s protestations, and accept it as a body that could finance cultural and welfare activities in Venice.

Eventually, in 1936, the Venetian commune was granted by the state the same rights for tourist development as San Remo. With the Royal Decree 16/07/36 n. 1404,<sup>175</sup> it was decided that Venice could host a casino with various related attractions, under the control of the Provincial Committee for Tourism presided over by Count Ludovico Foscari.<sup>176</sup> The national government desired that the

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid, session 15 October 1938.

<sup>171</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Quota di compartecipazione del Ministero per la Stampa e la Propaganda ai proventi del casino’ municipale’, trim. III, 1936, n. 2412.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, ‘Variazioni al bilancio preventivo del comune per l’esercizio 1941’, trim. II, 1941, n. 936.

<sup>173</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 27 October 1938.

<sup>174</sup> Barizza, *Il Casino Municipale di Venezia*, p. 23. In order to obtain better conditions, the municipality set out to outline a kind of *cahier des doléances* which exposed the economic problems afflicting the city (according to the report, embroidery and glassware production were both experiencing difficulties, Porto Marghera was not meeting expectations, and Venice was the only large *Comune* in Italy to reveal a balance of payments deficit) (Ibid).

<sup>175</sup> Barizza, *Il Casino Municipale di Venezia*, p. 9.

<sup>176</sup> Bertini, ‘Autunno dorato a Venezia’. According to Barizza, the move embodied the ‘apex’ of the

institution open for business as soon as was practicable in order to increase levels of tourism in Venice, and thus relieve the difficult economic situation. After all, as the Podestà had declared to Minister Buffarini on 1 February 1936, Venice not only represented an invaluable means of ‘projecting Italy’ to overseas visitors but was also the foremost national tourist attraction.<sup>177</sup> A provisional *casa da gioco* was therefore set up at once by the Ciga within the premises of the Hotel Excelsior<sup>178</sup> for which the municipality paid 100,000 lire on a monthly basis (in the first year the rent had been established at a symbolic 1 lira per month).<sup>179</sup> In the meantime, the Venice *Comune* had guaranteed the construction of permanent venues for the new casino, a summer one at the Lido and a winter one in Venice (despite initial scepticism surrounding the location of gambling in the city). For the winter location, ‘the Commune had acquired a number of distinctive buildings that were considered as possible venues: the list is interesting in its own right, including the Grand Hotel Gritti, the Palazzo Labia (celebrated for its frescoes by Tiepolo), the Palazzo Grassi (acquired from Giancarlo Stucky) and the Palazzo Giustinian’.<sup>180</sup>

According to the official convention, the licensees were asked by the municipality to run the casino ‘in a luxurious manner’, hosting daily entertainment shows and small concerts, and the programme of events was to be worked out together with members of the municipality. This furthers the thesis that the area around the Grandi Alberghi was destined to elite tourism. Also, licensees were required to contribute to the production of tourist propaganda for Venice and the Lido.<sup>181</sup> Personnel working at the casino had to be of Italian nationality and members of the Fascist Syndicates of the city of Venice.<sup>182</sup> The Ciga also resolved itself to grant money earned from gambling to the construction of a new pavilion for the Biennale Cinema where profits deemed ‘immoral’ were channelled into an

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politics of the *Greater Venice* pursued by Volpi (Barizza, *Il Casino Municipale di Venezia*, p. 9).

<sup>177</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 5 maggio 1936.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Accelerazione lavori per ultimazione casino municipale’, trim. IV, 1937, n. 2528. ‘The Excelsior had its own gaming rooms in the 1920s, fashionably hung with fabrics designed by Mariano Fortuny’ (Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 302).

<sup>180</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 302.

<sup>181</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Casino Municipale. Norme di esecuzione della convenzione per la gestione’, trim. I, 1940, n. 1759.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, ‘Provvedimento per lo sviluppo turistico veneziano’, trim. III, 1936, n. 1487.

institution –the Cinema Festival- of high cultural and moral standard.<sup>183</sup>

With work on the winter venue underway in the Palazzo Giustinian in Venice, the town council approved a project for the construction of a permanent site for the casino at the Lido (in 1937 the state, under pressure from the Church, halted the refurbishment of Palazzo Giustinian, and gambling would henceforth only take place at the Lido).<sup>184</sup> The project entailed the purchase of the ex-fortress ‘Quattro Fontane’ (deemed suitable because of its proximity to the Excelsior Palace) and the construction of the *casa da gioco* as well as a new cinematographic pavilion.<sup>185</sup> On 26 June 1936, the municipal administration applied again to the Government General Authority for the right to acquire the ex-fortress. Part of the area was to be let for thirty years to the *Ente Biennale* for the permanent cinema pavilion after which all the buildings put in place by the *Ente* would pass into municipal ownership.<sup>186</sup> In 1937, the Minister of Finance permitted the conclusion of the deal between the State and the Venice Comune, and the *Ente Biennale* obtained part of the area on which the ex-fortress ‘Quattro Fontane’ was built.<sup>187</sup> The *Fascio di Lido*, following the construction of the new casino was compelled to let out the sports courts at ‘Quattro Fontane’ for which it sought compensation of 10,000 lire from the municipality, meaning that even local Fascism was subject to the changes required by the new urban planning and the development of elite tourism.<sup>188</sup>

According to Margaret Plant, ‘the casino would eventually be positioned as the central building in a large piazza fronting onto the sea, with the Cinema Palace to the left and the open-air cinema to the right; a loggia linked the buildings’,<sup>189</sup> representing both symbolically and physically, the bond between upper-class entertainment and commodified cultural activities. The project would ultimately bring about a concentration of leisure adjacent to the Ciga chain of hotels, and as

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid, ‘Concessione d’uso al comune da parte della Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi’, trim. IV, 1936, n. 716.

<sup>184</sup> Barizza, *Il Casino Municipale di Venezia*, p. 13.

<sup>185</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Lavori di sgombero terreno e demolizione dell’ex forte di Quattro Fontane al Lido’, trim. IV, 1936, n. 502.

<sup>186</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 24 March 1937.

<sup>187</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Acquisto dell’Ex-Forte di Quattro Fontane di Lido’, trim. III, 1937, n. 2553.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, ‘Indennizzo al Fascio di Lido per forzato abbandono campo sportivo a Quattro Fontane’, trim. II, 1937, n. 1662.



soon as the casino was completed, the tourist appeal of the area would be further enhanced with the construction of brand new bathing facilities.<sup>190</sup> It is significant that in all these projects, the Ciga was constantly involved alongside the Venice *Comune*.<sup>191</sup> In particular, Alfredo Campione, a member of the *Consulta Municipale* and a representative of the *Federazione Commercianti* acted as a liaison between the company and the municipality.<sup>192</sup>

In the event, gambling successfully served all the tourist purposes it had originally been intended to promote. During a town council meeting in 1938, the Podestà declared that, despite the political controversy, the casino, the functioning of which was controlled by the Provincial Committee for Tourism,<sup>193</sup> had clearly benefited the tourist industry, and had contributed to the development of other similar initiatives such as the new cinema pavilion. According to the Podestà, it had also stimulated a turnover of capital which had directly benefited the Venetian population on a number of levels.<sup>194</sup>

In 1940, according to the municipal accounts, the main source of income was still constituted by the profits of the *casa da gioco* (35 million lire).<sup>195</sup> Thus, when the war forced the casino's closure in 1941, the local administration was desperate for the central government in Rome to provide an alternative source of revenue. The Podestà admitted that since the casino had ceased operations, tourism at the Lido had virtually stopped. The wealth created by gambling, it was argued, had been the decisive factor in keeping the municipality afloat financially up to that point.<sup>196</sup> The case of the casino helps us to understand the functioning of the various branches of the cultural machinery in Venice, and how it further expanded to allow more cultural diversification and welfare activities funded by the leisure industry.

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<sup>189</sup> Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 305.

<sup>190</sup> AMV, *Determinazioni Podestarili*, 'Turismo. Materiale arredamento capanne e stabilimenti in zona casino', trim. III, 1939, n. 2042.

<sup>191</sup> Barizza, *Il Casino Municipale di Venezia*, p. 14.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> 200,000 lire had been confined to the 'rebirth' of the traditional Venetian Carnival (Barizza, *Il Casino Municipale di Venezia*, p. 23).

<sup>194</sup> AMV, *Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia*, session 15 October 1938.

<sup>195</sup> Other incomes corresponded to various taxes and revenues.

<sup>196</sup> AMV, *Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia*, session 22 October 1940.

Once the *casa da gioco* had been established at the Lido, profits from gambling were channeled towards additional ‘good causes’ activities, and were used to develop other cultural initiatives, including a budget for the revival of traditional festivals and other attractions, such as open air theatrical and musical events. The town council had recognised that such contributions were the only way of justifying the existence of a casino in the eyes of Venetians and of the regime. Cultural events of ‘high’ educational standard could counterbalance the low morality of the *casa da gioco*, in tune with the wishes of the central government. It must be mentioned that the state had in fact allowed the city of Venice to open it only upon some precise conditions: that the municipality found a seat for the *casa da gioco* of the standard of the most luxurious ones already existing in Europe; that the municipality created a series of tourist attractions around it; that its management undertook the restoration of *La Fenice* Theatre (which had been recently acquired by the Venice Comune); that the municipality established a welcoming centre for foreign tourists; and that it participated in the construction of a new bathing establishment in the area next to the casino.<sup>197</sup> This project would cost the city of Venice around 41 million lire.<sup>198</sup> Not only was the regime backing the development of elite tourism in the area of ‘Quattro Fontane’ at the Lido, it was also pushing the city to use the casino profits for the renovation of eminent cultural venues.

Most importantly, the Carnival and the Theatre *La Fenice* benefited from casino revenue.<sup>199</sup> At the beginning of 1941, when the *Ente Autonomo Teatro La Fenice* needed extensive subsidies for refurbishment, the bulk of the money came from the profits of gambling.<sup>200</sup> The Podestà issued a decree forcing the licensees to settle nearly 11,000 lire in favour of *La Fenice*.<sup>201</sup> After all, the revitalisation of the old theatre was considered by the Venetian municipality as being part of the central nucleus of the ‘new tourist life’ of Venice, and the revenue of the casino was seen as a vital ingredient of any project to re-establish the venerable theatrical

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid, session 6 July 1938.

<sup>198</sup> AMV, Alverà, *Il Bilancio del Comune di Venezia e le Opere Realizzate dal 1930 al 1938*, Venezia, 1938.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, ‘Lavori di restauro al Teatro La Fenice richiesti dall’Ente Autonomo del teatro’, trim. I, 1941, n. 354.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid, ‘Mutuo di 12.000.000 di lire con la SAVIAT’, trim. III, 1938, n. 1907.

institution.<sup>202</sup> The Podestà also asked to see additional artistic initiatives promoted as part of the new *La Fenice*. As a result, a certain sum was set aside for the organisation of a concert season after refurbishment was completed.<sup>203</sup>

The phenomenon of the proceeds of gambling being used to finance more serious cultural events and institutions went further, and it was officially decided that every year the *casa da gioco* should subsidise the theatre to the tune of one million lire.<sup>204</sup> Of this sum, 700,000 lire were devolved to the ordinary management of the institution while the rest was to cover restoration expenses.<sup>205</sup> The patterns of cultural revitalization also involved working with a network of existing theatres scattered around Venice. For example, on 25 September 1936, the concessionary society of the casino signed an agreement with UNAT (Unione Nazionale dell'Arte Teatrale) establishing that the former should grant to the Theatre *Goldoni* 107,000 lire for the drama seasons of 1936-37, 1937-38, and 1938-39, contributing to refurbishment costs and allowing the most renowned theatre companies to stage their plays there.<sup>206</sup>

Other high culture events such as the Biennale Music and Theatre festivals also received financial support from the casino.<sup>207</sup> Indeed, its contributions were considered so important that upon its wartime closure, officials in Venice expressed deep concerns about the future funding of the Biennale activities.<sup>208</sup> According to the town council, the failure of the festivals in the early 1940s was due, not only to lack of interest on the part of the audience, but also to the absence of the guaranteed sum of 50,000 lire previously provided by gambling.<sup>209</sup>

The whole spectrum of cultural activities was covered by the casino revenue: it was not just supporting fine arts and high culture but also mass culture,

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<sup>202</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 18 May 1938. 'The Fenice renovations proceeded under the direction of Eugenio Miozzi, with Nino Barbantini in charge of interior decoration' (Plant, *Venice, Fragile City*, p. 302).

<sup>203</sup> Barizza, *Il Casino Municipale di Venezia*, p. 13.

<sup>204</sup> AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 30 June 1936.

<sup>205</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Provvedimenti per lo sviluppo turistico veneziano', trim. III, 1936, n. 2351.

<sup>206</sup> Barizza, *Il Casino Municipale di Venezia*, p. 13.

<sup>207</sup> Royal Decree 11 November 1938, n. 1844.

<sup>208</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbali del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 17 December 1940.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

in keeping with the regime's desire of spreading its propaganda and 'going towards the people'. In this light, the mass media, especially radio and cinema, benefited greatly from the existence of the *casa da gioco*. In 1936, the town council discussed the possibility that a sum could be taken from its profits to support Italian cinema, in the expectation that this would contribute to the success of the annual Biennale Film Festival.<sup>210</sup> Thus, when the festival registered losses in 1939, the Biennale administration made a request to the Minister for Press and Propaganda to cover their expenses, on the basis that the Ministry was partly subsidized by the casino itself.<sup>211</sup> Soon afterwards, the Podestà decreed that the *casa da gioco* should devote two million lire annually to the *Ente Nazionale per la Cinematografia Educativa* and 500,000 lire to the arrangement of art shows in the city.<sup>212</sup> Articles 14 and 15 of the Royal Decree 17 November 1927, had established that every seaside resort should benefit, on an annual basis, to the national radio broadcast, with the amount of the contribution determined by the size of the existing bathing establishments. In 1937, it was decided that the sum owed by the Venetian municipality (1,100 lire payable to the *Intendenza di Finanza*) should be taken from the balance of the *casa da gioco*.<sup>213</sup> In 1939, the *Regio Istituto d'Arte* of Venice developed a project for the establishment of a school of stage design. Again, the funds were to be drawn from the profits of gambling.<sup>214</sup>

The Venetian casino came to rank alongside other philanthropic institutions through its support of local artists, although it tended to do this only for those affiliated with the Fascist Syndicate of Fine Arts. Thus, by promoting the membership of a Fascist organisation, the casino also indirectly established itself as a Fascist institution. In such ways, it succeeded, at least in part, to dispel its image of amorality and decadence. In 1937, the Podestà referred to a letter sent on 4 June

<sup>210</sup> AMV, Verbalì delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 30 June 1936.

<sup>211</sup> ASAC, Serie Verbalì del Comitato di Amministrazione dell'Ente Biennale, vol. III, 28/01/35-30/01/43, session 16 May 1940.

<sup>212</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Provvedimenti per lo sviluppo turistico veneziano', trim. III, 1936, n. 1409. The casino's official charter, instead, had not mentioned 'art shows in general', but 'important outdoor theatre and musical events' (Ibid, 'Provvedimenti per lo sviluppo turistico veneziano', trim. III, 1936, n. 2351).

<sup>213</sup> Ibid, 'Turismo. Contributo obbligatorio per la radiofonia anno 1937', trim. IV, 1936, n. 347.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid, 'Convenzione fra l'Ente Autonomo del Teatro La Fenice e il Regio Istituto d'Arte di Venezia per la istituzione di una scuola di scenografia', trim. II, 1939, n. 1498.

by the Prefect of Venice, directing his attention towards the difficult position of Venetian artists. According to the Podestà, the condition of the housing market in Venice was so bad as to make the application of the '2% law' impossible.<sup>215</sup> Nonetheless, it was necessary to come to the aid of those struggling artists in a period in which the economic situation was particularly problematic. Therefore, the Podestà decided that the managers of the casino should establish a special fund of 25,000 lire in order to purchase the works of artists who were members of the Syndicates of Fine Arts of Venice, and who had been resident in the city for at least one year. Once the works of art had been finished, they could be ceded to the syndicates which were in charge of their sale to the public.<sup>216</sup> The fund was set up every year with various sums; however, in 1941, during wartime, SAVIAT, the managing company of the casino, still devolved 25,000 lire in favour of needy, talented artists.<sup>217</sup> The casino, therefore, could act to assist the Fascist cause. It did so in 1937, when an agreement was established between the town council and the Provincial Fascist Federation, determining that part of the expenses incurred by the federation for charity works should be covered by contributions from the casino.<sup>218</sup> On another occasion, the Podestà granted 200,000 lire drawn from the casino budget to the Provincial Federation of the *Fasci di Combattimento*, to be used for the development of the seaside camps and welfare activities for children.<sup>219</sup>

Finally, the question of casino funding for social and cultural projects was also applied to the direction of urban planning in the Lido in the 1930s. The SAVIAT was obliged by the terms of its official charter to provide accommodation for the local population of the island. In view of this, it created a property company for the management of the future new houses.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> The '2% law' decreed that 2% of sums destined to public buildings should be devoted to the city's arts projects.

<sup>216</sup> AMV, Determinazioni Podestarili, 'Provvedimenti a favore degli artisti veneziani', trim. III, 1937, n. 2209.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, 'Casino' municipale. Norme di esecuzione della convenzione per la gestione', trim. II, 1940, n. 1759.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid, 'Gestione casino municipale. Contributo a favore della Federazione Provinciale Fascista per le opere assistenziali e per altre manifestazioni', trim. III, 1937, n. 1336.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid, 'Gestione casino municipale. Contributo a favore della Federazione Provinciale dei Fasci di combattimento per le colonie estive e per altre manifestazioni', trim. III, 1938, n. 2093.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, 'Casino' municipale. Norme di esecuzione della convenzione per la gestione', trim. II, 1940, n. 1759. Moreover, the SAVIAT provided 1,000,000 lire to the town council of Chioggia,

In such ways, a series of connections were established in Venice linking the interests of leisure-oriented and cultural tourism. On one hand, culture, in the form of exhibitions, concerts and public celebrations, was to serve tourism in the manner discussed in previous chapters, on the other, institutions of tourism and entertainment such as the casino, were intended to contribute to the funding of additional cultural, activities and social reforms. The casino was founded with the primary aim of relieving the shortcomings of the Venetian economy. Once again, little room was left for ideological factors; the final goal remained the economic well-being of Venice, rather than the 'nationalisation of the masses'. Despite the fact that the municipality and the casino itself were connected to and sought the approval and participation of the central government, this partnership with Fascism did not bring with it the subservience of the town authorities to the ideological objectives of the regime.

## 5.6 The Lido between Fascist ideology and cosmopolitanism

Gian Piero Brunetta has argued that 'while Rome increasingly identif[ed] itself with the spirit of Fascism, Venice remain[ed] a bridge to the world, the most open and cosmopolitan place in Fascist Italy'.<sup>221</sup> It was certainly true that the Lido was part of a Fascist state and subject to the ideological demands and consensus building efforts of the regime. It was also true, however, that it stood first and foremost as a renowned beach resort of international prestige, and that this identity was incompatible with any attempt to impose Fascist norms of nationalism and behaviour. To acknowledge all the laws on costumes and morality issued for other Italian cities would simply be to erect barriers to the successful development of the cosmopolitan tourist atmosphere upon which the Lido depended.<sup>222</sup>

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nearby Venice, as the city was going through a period of severe economic depression (Ibid, 'Variazioni al bilancio preventivo del comune per l'esercizio 1941', trim. II, 1941, n. 936). Venetian officials also discussed the fact that the pigeon shooting facilities at the Lido were funded by the municipal casino to the tune of 250,000 lire. According to Gino Damerini, this was a sum that would have been better employed in the restoration of Goldoni's house or the library at the Correr museum (AMV, Verbali delle sedute della Consulta Municipale di Venezia, session 18 October 1939). Under pressure, SAVIAT promised to grant 180,000 lire to the upkeep of the Palazzo Giustinian (Ibid, session 29 May 1940).

<sup>221</sup> Brunetta, 'La città del cinema', in Isnenghi, Woolf, (eds.), *Storia di Venezia*, p. 2195.

<sup>222</sup> According to the Ciga, the so-called 'industry of the foreigner' represented the third most

For example, on 18 July 1929, the head of police administration of Venice wrote to the Prefect Gianni Bianchetti informing him of how the Podestà Ettore Zorzi, on 24 June, had been ordered to hang on the walls a public notice containing some regulations to be observed by tourists at the Lido, both at the seaside and in public streets.<sup>223</sup> Numerous hotelkeepers then complained to the police office because policemen, acting under this order, had fined 'honest citizens'.<sup>224</sup> To make matters worse, Casattini, the President of the *Consorzio Alberghi di Lido*, complained to Zorzi, who replied that he had simply been following the specific directives received from Rome,<sup>225</sup> after the intervention of Cardinal La Fontaine.<sup>226</sup>

In view of this, on 19 August 1929, the General Direction of State Police of the Ministry of the Interior, hoping to restore a degree of common sense to the policing of Venice, wrote to the Prefect of Venice demanding an end to excessive interference with the prosperous tourist trade in the Lido, and by extension with the well being of the national economy. Some months later, the Prefect contacted Zorzi, warning him that, while it was important to follow instructions coming from Rome, it was also vital not to place any interpretation upon them which might lead to tourists deciding to take their custom elsewhere.<sup>227</sup>

On 4 July 1932, Alfredo Campione thanked Prefect Bianchetti for having adopted a more flexible position on the question of regulating morality and behaviour at the Lido. 'After all', argued Campione, 'the Lido beach resort retains

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important contributor to the Italian national economy. The Ciga also welcomed the deals that Volpi, as Minister of Finance, had struck with Great Britain and the United States because without 'sincere cordiality and reciprocal faith, it [was] not possible to think about tourist development'. Internationalism, cosmopolitanism and political stability were essential if sufficient tourist numbers were to be attracted to Venice and the Lido. (Camera di Commercio, Industria e Artigianato di Venezia, Registro Ditte, I Fascicolo, n. 4905, 'Compagnia Italiana dei Grandi Alberghi. Verbale di Assemblea, 8 aprile 1926').

<sup>223</sup> The regulations forbade: to wear bathing dresses at restaurants; to dance on the beach; women to wear bathing gowns above the knees; to have common changing shelters for men and women; to play or listen to music on the beach; to drink alcohol on the beach or the streets; any violent or harassing behaviour (ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 44, busta 'Stazioni balneari e invernali. Disposizioni di massima. Tutela della moralità').

<sup>224</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 44, busta 'Stazioni balneari e invernali. Disposizioni di massima. Tutela della moralità'.

<sup>225</sup> However, according to the head of police administration, Count Zorzi had made clear that in that period Venice did not need foreigners so much and if those foreigners, annoyed by the new regulations, should choose to leave the Lido, Venice would have surely earned her living from alternative commerce and industries (Ibid).

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

special conditions compared to other Italian cities, and to foreign competitors any pretext is good to keep away tourists from the island'.<sup>228</sup> One month later, the General Direction of State Police contacted Bianchetti. Apparently, the Commissariat for Tourism had informed the Minister of the Interior of the manner in which the Lido was being monitored. The Minister was of the opinion that the style of policing was inspired by a drive towards excessive discipline rather than any genuine need to regulate public morality at the Lido. Moreover, they contrasted the current situation with the general order issued on 12 June 1929, in which the Minister had demanded sensible monitoring in order to avoid any unnecessary authoritarian approaches that might damage the national economy. The Minister subsequently contacted the head of police administration to clarify the nature of the instructions handed down by the central government.<sup>229</sup>

In the meantime, the English press had started a campaign about tourist regulations at the Lido. An article in the *Evening Standard* on 24 June 1932 entitled 'The Lido in peril' reported that

'The sudden ban on dancing and the wearing of bathing-dress at meals at restaurants at the Lido, is I imagine, a part of Mussolini's purity crusade. The Duce has already abolished night life in Rome, as seen in the absence of the dance clubs, cabarets and supper restaurants which once flourished in the capital. He has also 'cleaned up' the once beggar and tout-infested city of Naples. His Spartan prohibition of roulette and other gambling games at San Remo, in spite of the consequent loss to the state Treasury, has resulted in making that once lively little rival to Monte Carlo as quiet as the grave. And now, at the beginning of the summer season, Mussolini has forced the Venetian authorities to issue their Draconian decree against dancing and laxity in dress at the Lido. The result will be, I predict, a sudden discovery by the Lido-lovers of previous years that a disagreeable odour rises on hot summer evenings from the shallow lagoons, and the popularity of the Lido will wane as suddenly as it waxed.'<sup>230</sup>

Another article published in the *Daily Herald* of 25 June 1932, entitled 'He and she must meet in the sea' provides another example of this campaign against

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.



the regulations imposed upon the Lido:

‘Women’s bathing costumes with skirts down to the knees; segregation of men’s and women’s bathing machines, so that the sexes can only meet in the water; no dancing in bathing costumes.

These are three of the revolutionary regulations just promulgated for the Venice Lido and other Italian seaside resorts by the Italian Home Office, acting under strong pressure from the Vatican. Managers of bathing establishments and the general public are furious at the new rules, which will substitute the cumbrous bathing suits of a generation ago for the fairy-like décolletés of today. Many protests have been received from foreign visitors at the Lido, where new regulations have just been posted up. Not only must bathing machines for women be placed at considerable distance from those occupied by men, but persons not fully clothed are not allowed to frequent the neighbouring cafes or walk in the neighbourhood.<sup>231</sup>

On 26 June, the *Evening Standard* continued its campaign reporting that

‘The authorities at Venice have prohibited dancing and taking meals in bathing costumes at the Lido bathing resort. It was the Lido that set fashion in ‘bathing costumes holidays’, in fact, it has become the ‘thing’ for other resorts to call their bathing beaches ‘the so and so Lido’. Every day in the season the terraces on the pleasure island in the Venetian lagoon have been thronged with holiday makers in the gayest and most daring of beach costumes. The island is reached by steamer in about ten minutes, and it has become the most beautiful and fashionable bathing resort in Italy. The season begins in May and finishes in October, but the best months are May, June and September. The beach has fine sand and the water is only a foot or two deep for a long way out. Brightly decorated tents and cabins stretch for a mile or two along the seashore. In London today we are much more broadminded. At Serpentine, ‘London’s Lido’ bathers in costume can take light refreshment in a tent and sun themselves on the bank’.<sup>232</sup>

On 27 June 1932, representatives of the Ciga had written to the Prefect of Venice that ‘the defamatory campaign emanating from the English press was causing great damage to the Lido’, and recommended that the Minister of the

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<sup>230</sup> *Evening Standard*, 24 June 1932.

<sup>231</sup> ‘He and She must meet in the sea’, *Daily Herald*, 25 June 1932.

<sup>232</sup> ‘Venice surprise. Italian resort that set the fashion’, *Evening Standard*, 26 June 1932.

Interior issue orders so as to avoid the possibility that foreign countries could use the rules for morality issued by the Italian government as a weapon to discredit the Venetian municipality.<sup>233</sup> Similar concerns were expressed by the Podestà, who also warned about the effects of the overseas press reporting. From these accounts it is clear that for the city of Venice, the image of subjection to Fascist laws and codes of behaviour had inflicted great harm to the international prestige of the Lido. The island needed to be seen to be a free and open place if wished to remain a popular holiday destination. According to Marco Fincardi, therefore, Venetian tourism and the Biennale festivals remained something of an island of liberalism and cosmopolitanism in a country under the influence of provincial moral codes and police controls. 'If in the OND circles Mussolini had demanded that cultural programs did not reflect any foreign influence', wrote Fincardi, 'in the hotel terraces and gardens at the Lido, guests danced to rhythms which were anything but autarchic'.<sup>234</sup>

In wartime, the problem of morality at the holiday resorts became even more acute. One Roman newspaper even complained that the spirit of Rome and of a Fascist and warlike Italy was utterly absent in Venice, adding that 'in the nightmare of the war, the city stood passive and immobile with its numerous tourists expending their energies on mere trivialities'.<sup>235</sup> As for the Venice Biennale, the Patriarch noticed how sixty-four salons were filled with still life paintings, landscapes and portraits, indicative of a 'frightening void of spiritual and civic duty' and an anti-religious and anti-national art. With Mussolini constantly announcing that war was at hand, in Venice there appeared to be extraordinarily few artists coming to terms with the martial spirit of the age. At the Biennale, there were a small number of participants capable 'of interpreting the essence of the grandeur of Rome, and exalting her role in the conclusive act of the Fascist Revolution'.<sup>236</sup>

It was in this atmosphere of national moral anxiety that, on 9 July 1942, the

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<sup>233</sup> ASV, Gabinetto della Prefettura di Venezia, anni 1893-1936, pacco n. 44, busta 'Stazioni balneari e invernali. Disposizioni di massima. Tutela della moralità'.

<sup>234</sup> Fincardi, 'Gli 'Anni Ruggenti' dell'antico leone', p. 457.

<sup>235</sup> Guido Guida, 'Roma guerriera e fascista alla XXII Biennale di Venezia', *Roma*, August 1940.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

Minister of the Interior warned the various Italian Prefects that life at the seaside resorts must be subject to rigid moral criteria, and that he intended to impose stricter regulations on the Lido in the new wartime conditions. Specifically, variety shows and bands were forbidden, and celebrations of a light-hearted, celebratory character were suspended in favour of competitive sports, and more serious artistic and cultural events.<sup>237</sup> Shortly afterwards, a citizen named Arturo Vidal wrote to the Prefect of Venice bemoaning the fact that the most recent decree regarding morality at seaside resorts during the summer season had not been fully applied to the Lido. According to Vidal, this simply signified the acceptance of bad habits and slack moral codes. He complained: 'I live here and I can understand the sense of openness prevailing in this area, however, I ask, on behalf of lots and lots honest citizens that the Prefect enforce that decree to the Lido, too. (...) Here with us there are several evacuated families who live in mourning and grief'.<sup>238</sup>

Sources such as this would appear to indicate that, inappropriately in the eyes of some, the Lido had continued in the spirit of light heartedness that characterised its peacetime activities and that the war had not deeply affected it. This suggests that, despite the worsening of the political situation, the island sought to preserve its international atmosphere regardless of the ruling political ideology. Even when Fascism was at its most xenophobic and autarchic, the Lido continued to foster its international ties.

To conclude, Bosworth's account on Venice's wartime experience is significant:

'The special proof of surviving normality was to be the Cinema Biennale, due to open on 1 September. (...) 1940 had become one of the most important years in the history of the world. Nonetheless, Volpi added, he had never for a moment thought of cancelling the film show. Cinema was 'a necessity of our modern life' and the Duce personally willed the Biennale's continuation. Generally, Volpi believed, the present was a good time to reflect on 'the European economy of tomorrow', the world which would exist after the certain victory of the Axis. Then Italian industry would develop even more swiftly under the happy impulse of autarky, a policy which gave 'a permanent expression to that dynamism which

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

animates the Italian people and guides them towards the highest economic destiny'.<sup>239</sup>

## 5.7 Conclusions

This chapter has analysed the rise of the Lido as a renowned international beach resort, and the ambiguities surrounding the establishment of the island as a holidaying venue for wealthy tourists. Once the geographical distinctions between elite and mass tourism in the Lido had been decided upon, the resort started equipping itself with the most sophisticated tourist structures and facilities to meet expectations of an exclusive clientele.

In this framework, the Ciga acted as the architect of elite tourism in the island, emerging as a dynamic company which endorsed all the initiatives of cultural tourism. The Biennale Cinema Festival embodies the best example of 'tourist facilitator' implemented at the Lido in the 1930s. Steeped in the culture of the grand hotels, the festival, from its very beginning, stood out as a tourist enterprise best understood as an extension of the glamorous nights already taking place at the Lido. It was more of a local business than a national agent for cultural change dictated by the Fascist ideology. It is thus unsurprising that the regime only started to pay close attention to the event after the mid-1930s when the first serious bids for greater control over the mass media were made. This chapter has argued that, in its first years, the festival was relatively free from Fascist influence, and that the atmosphere radically changed only in 1937 when propagandistic aims began to overwhelm the event. Political affiliation with Nazi Germany and the ideological requirements of an imminent war put the festival under tighter censorship controls. Yet, it has been claimed that despite the Film Festival's later submission to growing Fascist influence, the regime never employed a straightforward cultural policy towards cinema, with propaganda being channelled mainly into newsreels rather than movies. Finally, this section has revealed that, even when Fascism promoted a martial ethic in the late 1930s, the Lido retained the cosmopolitan allure of a laid-back beach resort which withstood the implementation of regulations against easy leisure and light heartedness. The opening of the casino in the late 1930s reinforces the thesis that, even approaching another world conflict, there was still room for

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

idle leisure and money wasting, provided this brought additional wealth to the city of Venice. Mussolini might have taken Italy to war but Venice and the Lido continued to prioritise the demands of international tourism.

## 6. Conclusions

Fascism condemned democracy as a doctrine of ultra-individualism that served to atomize society and replace those ethical values that gave individuals a sense of community with a capitalist materialism wholly concerned with self-interest. In 1932, Benito Mussolini, in collaboration with Giovanni Gentile laid down the 'Foundations and Doctrine of Fascism', which later appeared in Gentile's monumental *Encyclopedia*. According to the entry:

'Fascist man is not only an individual but also a nation and a country. He embodies the ideals of individuals and generations bound together by a moral law, sharing traditions and a common mission. This moral law supplants the instinctual lure of a life enclosed within the circle of evanescent pleasures with a higher life founded upon duty: a life free from limitations of time and space; a life in which the individual, by means of self-sacrifice, the renunciation of self-interest, through death itself, can achieve that purely spiritual existence in which his value as a man consists'.<sup>1</sup>

Some scholars have placed great emphasis on anti-materialism as a formative influence upon fascist culture and fascist ideology in general. In her book on Fascist identity, Mabel Berezin stresses how the activist fascist regime promoted a politics of ritual, symbol and spectacle to replace the 'rational' thinking of liberalism.<sup>2</sup> Emilio Gentile has declared that 'Fascism explicitly rejected rationalism and elevated mythical thinking, both as a mental attitude and as a form of political behaviour'. For Gentile, the politics of Fascism were 'based on the conviction that both individuals and the masses were motivated by irrational and mythical thoughts'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As cited in Jeffrey Schnapp (ed.), *A Primer of Italian Fascism*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 2000, p. 47: Benito Mussolini (in collaboration with Giovanni Gentile), 'Fascism', in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, XIV, 1932.

<sup>2</sup> Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self. The Political Culture of Interwar Italy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Gentile, 'Fascism as political religion', p. 241.

Zeev Sternhell's interpretation of revolutionary fascism suggests that the movement was a cultural phenomenon before it became a political force. For Sternhell, the growth of fascism would not have been possible without the revolt against the principles of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.<sup>4</sup> It was also an original reaction against materialism, as fascism was a rebellion 'against modernity inasmuch as modernity was identified with the rationalism, optimism, and humanism of the eighteenth century'. Anti-materialism meant 'the rejection of the rationalistic, individualistic and utilitarian heritage of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'. This was a defining trait of Fascist ideology, as Fascism characterised itself as a spiritual 'revolt against bourgeois decadence'.<sup>5</sup> As Sternhell argues:

'I have no doubt about the essential contribution which the anti-materialist revision of Marxism made to fascism. Once linked to organic nationalism, the refusal of the Enlightenment heritage, the war against a whole humanistic and rationalist culture, this revision made possible the explosion of the fascist synthesis. This synthesis is born in France and reproduces itself in Italy. It impregnates French cultural and political life from the turn of the century: it is certainly this impregnation with fascist, fascistizing, antiliberal, authoritarian, 'antimaterialist' values which explains the failure of elites at the time of Vichy. It is certainly this impregnation which allows the formation of mass movements in the 1930s'.<sup>6</sup>

For Sternhell, therefore, 'Italian Fascism had deep roots, a coherent ideology and a wider -profoundly negative- significance as the first full-blown political manifestation of the wider cultural revolt against the Enlightenment tradition, with its rationalism and humanism'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology. From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1994, pp. 4-5-6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 7- 8, 30.

<sup>6</sup> As cited in Griffin, 'The current growth (or manufacture) of consensus within fascist studies', p. 33: Sternhell, *Ni Droite, ni gauche. Morphologie et Historiographie du Fascisme in France*, Paris, Fayard, 2000, p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> As cited in Roberts, 'How not to think about fascism and ideology', p. 188: Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, p. 256. Similarly, James Gregor considers fascism as a kind of cultural rebirth for the national renewal (as cited in Griffin, 'The current growth (or manufacture) of consensus within fascist studies', p. 30: Gregor, *Phoenix*, pp. 189, 30-1).

Although Sternhell's model has been undeniably influential, his interpretation of fascist ideology has received important criticism from those historians who claim that his history of ideas is divorced from any empirical history of fascism, which has resulted in the artificial separation of 'fascist ideology from fascism itself'.<sup>8</sup> Something akin to the intellectual middle ground is occupied by Pierre Milza who, in seeking to account for the evolution of fascism from its beginnings as a doctrine of anti-materialism advocated by small dissident groups to a totalitarian state in Italy, has spoken of a 'first' (idealist) fascism and a 'second' (pragmatic) fascism.<sup>9</sup> This is useful insofar as the cultural politics in Venice in the inter-war period would appear to have been characterised by the pragmatic fascism which Milza describes.

As Bosworth noticed about the bureaucracy of tourism under Fascism:

'One marked impression is of the superficiality of fascism even as it favoured the swelling of the Corporate State. Here were a regime and ideology that proclaimed that they would penetrate society as never before, yet, in the little world unveiled in the archives, Italians had gone on being self-interested and factionalised, as ordinary people often are'. The bureaucrats and experts of tourism in fascist Italy, it is plain, thought first of themselves (or their families), only second of 'Italy', and of Fascism hardly at all, though they always remembered to express their admiration for Mussolini and, when occasion offered, gratefully deployed his influence in their own causes. Most often, it seems, rather than being defined by politics, they adapted politics to their own self-interest.<sup>10</sup>

In the same manner, Venetian Fascism was concerned with reviving the local economy and creating an industrial base which, while under the regime's auspices, did not necessarily engage in the unthinking promotion of the Fascist doctrine. In fact, it seems that local politics in Venice were mostly guided by an opportunism and rationalism rather than dogma or ideology. As Alexander De Grand puts it, 'the

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave 1933-1939*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1995, pp. 1-25.

<sup>9</sup> As cited in Roberts, 'How not to think about fascism and ideology', p. 204: Pierre Milza, *Le Fascisme Français: Passé et Présent*, Paris, Flammarion, 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Bosworth, 'Tourist planning in Fascist Italy', p. 24.



aspirations of fascism's middle-class constituencies were realized within the established order, not against it'.<sup>11</sup> Equally, Venetian objectives were realized within Fascism, not against it: the municipality was always eager to search for formal recognition from the regime. Yet, as this thesis has consistently argued, cultural entertainment in the city was primarily the product of a rational and pragmatic set of concerns and objectives, and that rather than being produced by fascist ideology, cultural politics in Venice were the product of a 'second, pragmatic' fascism. Not only does this signify that Fascism in a sense contradicted itself by revealing a pragmatic side, it also meant that the regime had to come to terms with the development of self-interested factions and local ambitions within the city.

The pursuit of regional economic interests and the ideologically-driven Fascist project were by no means mutually exclusive and often overlapped, but close analysis of the Venetian case study strongly suggests that local objectives retained a position of primary importance while the interests of the Fascist regime were frequently relegated to a status of secondary importance. The fact that cultural events were at the heart of the Venetian tourist industry and local economy highlights the limited extent to which Fascist ideology imposed itself upon the cultural network of exhibitions, concerts and plays established in Venice. As has been extensively analysed, cultural showcases staged in Venice, whether they incorporated Fascist ideology or not, were primarily viewed by the municipality as a means of boosting local tourism and confronting the economic crisis. They were also conceptualised as part of a detailed plan of urban regeneration, according to which the historic town was to act as the site of cultural tourism while industrial activities were concentrated in the developing Porto Marghera area.

This thesis has deliberately taken into consideration the economic and civic functions of cultural events staged in Venice rather than their contents, arguing that their role as economic facilitators outweighed any propagandistic elements. Analysing the pragmatic side of concerts, theatre plays and festivals, this thesis has offered an

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander De Grand, *Italian Fascism. Its Origins and Development*, University of Nebraska Press,

alternative interpretation to those cultural historians who have tended to produce a picture of Italian society as being completely fascistized through the use of culture. Despite the claim that the regime made 'efforts both to aestheticize politics and to politicise art in the first decades of the Twentieth-century',<sup>12</sup> this study has revealed that the Venetian municipality cultivated significantly different goals. Local authorities were not as interested in conveying and popularising the Fascist message amongst Italians so much as they were concerned with the task of using culture to create an extensive series of popular attractions for the 'international tourist'.

Cultural attractions were fundamental in Venice not so much as a means of nationalisation of the masses but as a 'provider' of revenues to the local community. This involved not only celebrations of popular character, such as the events organised by the OND but also high culture institutions such as the venerable *La Fenice* Theatre. The variety of entertainments programmed in the 1930s were primarily for the consumption of tourists, and the responsibility for their administration naturally fell to a large extent therefore upon the Tourist Office. Cosmopolitanism and interstate relations were far more important than any autarchic considerations. It is not a coincidence that the Biennale was called Exhibition of International Arts, and events such as the Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese exhibitions were drawing upon the international renown of artists specifically to attract an international audience. Cultural entertainments sold to the public as commercial products were regularly taxed, as to contribute to the well-being of the local Tourist Office and Venetian tourism in general. If these showcases were gradually reinforcing their mercantile standing, then it was increasingly difficult to incorporate a straightforward, autarchic ideology like Fascism. In the same manner, a programme that specifically targeted the Italian masses, such as the phenomenon of the 'popular trains', ran counter to the desires of an influential part of the Venetian citizenry which sought to foster elite tourism and which was far less concerned with the expressed aims of the Fascist regime.

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Lincoln & London, 2000, p. 169.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Affron, Mark Antliff, (eds.), 'Introduction', in *Fascist Visions. Art and Ideology in France and Italy*, 1997, p. 18.

The rapid development of tourism and its institutions in Venice was not only a response to the increasingly demanding requirements of the tourist industry, but a process that mirrored the realization of the vision of Porto Marghera. With the recognition that the old parts of Venice were to be reliant predominantly upon the profits of tourism, the economic functions attached to the cultural entertainment season were exploited to the maximum, leading to the establishment of the new Biennale festivals in the 1930s. As the centrepiece of the industry of cultural-tourism promoted by Volpi, the survival of the new festivals depended on their continuing profitability far more than on their propaganda potential. In particular, the Biennale Cinema Festival was clearly conceived as part of a wider programme of tourist industry development in the Lido in the 1930s. As has been demonstrated, the central government only expressed significant interest in the event in the second half of the 1930s, when the festival was already an established feature on the Lido's cultural landscape. The Cinema Festival, as the glamorous pinnacle of the island's summer entertainment calendar, helped to consolidate the beach resort focus upon elite tourism. The establishment of the municipal casino and its subsequent contribution to the financing of numerous welfare activities and cultural events provide further evidence to support the contention that the Lido in the 1930s was witnessing a rapid process of cultural consumerism. All this was the product of a flexible Venetian accommodation with the Fascist authorities and their ideological concerns.

'Anti-individualistic, the fascist conception of life stresses the importance of the state. It affirms the value of the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the state', the *Enciclopedia Italiana* pronounced in 1932.<sup>13</sup> If we were to take into consideration what Fascist ideology dictated, then we should conclude that the Venetian municipality's attitude was highly individualistic and therefore, in a sense, 'anti-Fascist'. Or, more accurately, we should say that it was springing from a pragmatic Fascism, where a relatively non-constrictive ideology left room for the pursuit of local priorities and interests.

Competitions introduced at the 1930 Biennale of International Arts exposed the failure of ideological Fascism to forge a definite Fascist aesthetic. The institution increasingly became a place of opportunism and entrepreneurialism rather than an agent of cultural change. Aesthetic diversification served to widen the artistic choices offered to the cultural consumer rather than responding to the regime's patronage style, and most reforms implemented in the 1930s pointed at the growing commercialisation of the exhibition. At the same time, it also retained its original function of attracting crowds, showing a degree of continuity with the Liberal era.

The case of Venice strengthens the claim that Fascism could have both a dogmatic and an opportunistic side, and that the latter often produced very different policies and pronouncements from the former. Study of the relationship between the Venetian ruling class and the central government reveals the existence of major differences and disagreements over the cultural policy directives issued by the state. For instance, local authorities were of the opinion that the Lido was better suited to the cosmopolitan mood and rhythms of the *Grand Hotels* rather than the 'autarchic' atmosphere cherished by the Fascist regime. If Fascism had different, contrasting natures, the emerging picture, at least in Venice, is that of an imperfect, non-monolithic totalitarianism, where local cultural policies were driven by economic necessity and commercial considerations rather than loyalty to the regime. Therefore, it is no longer possible to view Italian Fascism as a form of totalitarianism with Mussolini dominating an omnipotent and ubiquitous state through the employment of sophisticated surveillance techniques and the use of terror. Forgacs is essentially correct when he argues that the regime 'took a relatively *laissez-faire* attitude towards certain aspects of culture and education, at least until the mid-1930s when the influence of Nazi Germany led to more interventionist policies and greater organizational centralization'.<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, Bosworth's claim that 'the rhythms of Italian economic and social life did not readily adjust to those of high politics, let alone of high ideology'

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<sup>13</sup> As cited in Schnapp (ed.), *A Primer of Italian Fascism*, p. 48: Mussolini, 'Fascism', in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, p. 847.

<sup>14</sup> Forgacs, 'Introduction', in *Rethinking Italian Fascism*, p. 2.

remains convincing.<sup>15</sup> Rather than Venice being incorporated into the Fascist state, and thinking in unison with the regime, it was certain aspects that were drawn from Fascism, above all the rhetoric of economic reconstruction of the area, which obviously fitted so well with the Venetian population's expectations. Many of the patterns of Venetian life moved in ways which were very different from those of Fascist ethics and such differences ensured that Fascism did not institute an all-controlling and completely alienating totalitarian society: 'this Fascism, at least in its most accustomed local manifestations, was soon domesticated into rituals which doubtless aimed to be 'totalitarian' but which in practice did not radically disrupt the deep structures of Venetian life'.<sup>16</sup>

This thesis contributes to a developing revisionist literature that challenges the image of a regime whose ideology dominated and shaped the everyday lives of ordinary Italians. In the case of Venice, fascistization was at best superficial. Fascist propaganda and ideology may have been inscribed onto cultural events in Venice, but the desire to use those events to produce a recognisably Fascist culture behind which the masses could be mobilized, insofar as it existed in Venice, remained subordinate to the requirement that the events retain the revenue generating potential to guarantee the economic future of the city and its people. The city made use of Fascism to realize its most important economic project, Porto Marghera, while at the same time popularising the image of a modern, vibrant, industrial Venice. As modern manufacturing industry was transferred to the newly developed areas, the economic future of the historic town was mortgaged to the ongoing success of the tourist industry. It was entirely logical for the town's authorities, the well-being of Venice uppermost in their minds, to seek to use the town's cultural and artistic heritage, its festivals, exhibitions and tourist season, to attract the largest numbers of consumers. Cultural tourism in Venice extended beyond the Fascist-imposed boundaries of a xenophobic and autarchic ideology.

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<sup>15</sup> Bosworth, 'Tourist planning in Fascist Italy', p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, 'Venice, 1911-45', p. 18.

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